DANGEROUS

DIRTY

A FUGITIVE FAMILY IN THE REVOLUTIONARY UNDERGROUND

VIOLENT

& YOUNG

ZAYD AYERS DOHRN

Dangerous, Dirty, Violent, and Young

A Fugitive Family in the Revolutionary Underground

Zayd Ayers Dohrn

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY

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For Rachel, Dalin, and Light

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We are all outlaws in the eyes of America
We are obscene lawless hideous dangerous dirty violent and young

—Jefferson Airplane, “We Can Be Together,” 1969

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A Note on Interviews and Sources

This book grew out of years of private conversations with my parents and their friends from the revolutionary undergrounds of the 1970s and 1980s, and with the government agents who tried to catch them. Those early conversations—at least, the ones I was able to record—became the spine of my ten-part narrative podcast series, *Mother Country Radicals* (2022).

That series focused, by necessity, on the most public part of my family's story (1968–70), a period well suited to the format since it was exhaustively documented in audio communiqués and radio and TV news, and because it was the only part of the story most people were willing to talk about on tape.

But my parents grew increasingly shy of recording devices after they went underground. There's no audio or video, or even reliable paper documentation, from my family's decade-plus on the run—from the time of my birth or the earliest years of my childhood. We didn't keep journals or photo albums in our family; we burned whatever letters we received. So, like many kids, I've had to piece together what I now understand about my origin story after the fact—from bits of half-overheard conversation, fragments of sense memory, and the way it was all passed down to me.

I wasn't even certain at first if the few scenes I remember from those early years were reliable or if I was "remembering" stories I heard much later, secondhand. So I looked it up. It turns out most people can't recall anything from before they were two—this is what psychologists call childhood amnesia. But memories from between two and four are common, and emotional or traumatic events can be especially sticky, so it makes sense that some of this would be vividly imprinted.

In any case, after the podcast came out, I started to learn a lot more about my family. Friends gifted me boxes of old letters and photographs.

Strangers reached out, wanting to talk for the first time. And I finally got hold of a tranche of FBI files I'd been chasing for years—7,833 pages of newly declassified memos, surveillance reports, and secret wiretaps, detailing the Bureau's obsessive hunt for my parents: interviews with their relatives and friends, crime scene photos, autopsy reports, and testimony from undercover informants and government spies.

These documents are themselves often unreliable, the product of FBI lawbreaking and politically motivated investigations. But in the years I've spent digging through the official archive, I've discovered some unexpected contradictions in my family's private story. *We couldn't have been there rather than here, could we?* The geography is impossible. The timeline is off. Something has been altered or obscured. *Somebody is hiding something.*

So, to research this book, to dig into my family history and my own past, I've had to rethink what I thought I knew. In countless new interviews and conversations, I've uncovered surprising revelations about my parents and the history of radical resistance in this country, which have changed the way I understand my family and legacy—and what my parents' story might mean for all of us and our collective future.

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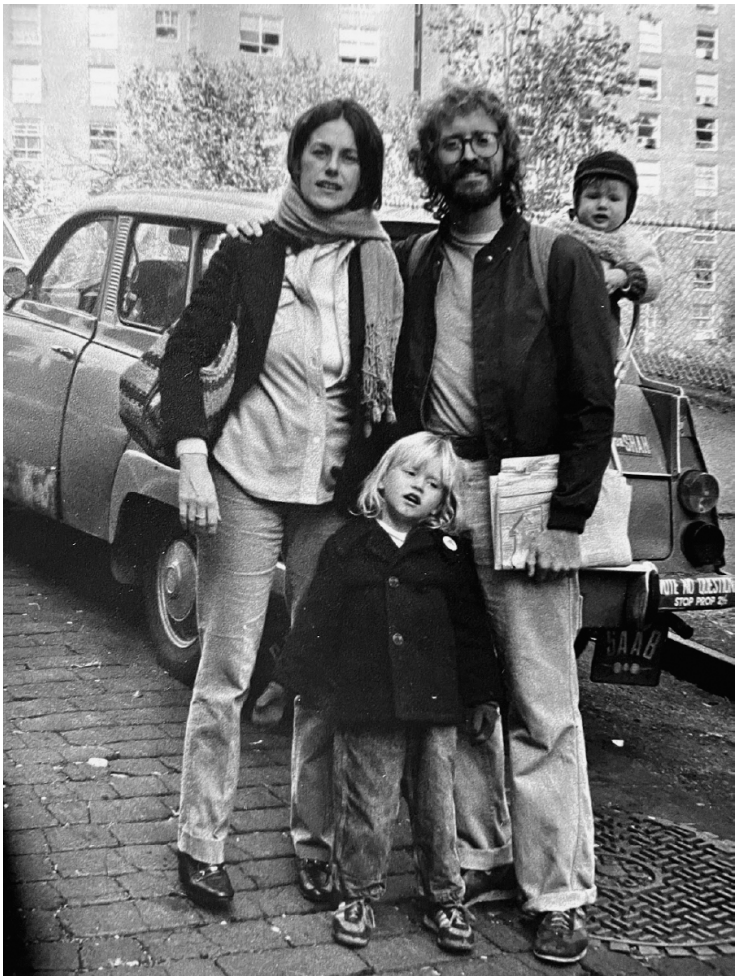
Prologue

Underground

(Harlem, 1980)

Look out, kid, they keep it all hid.
—Bob Dylan, “Subterranean Homesick Blues”



My parents, my brother, and me (bottom row, center), in Harlem, after a long drive through the underground, c. 1980.

One cold night in December, when I was not yet four years old, my mother woke me while it was still dark, pressing her face against my cheek and whispering, “We have to leave. Right away.”

I rolled off my mattress, stumbled blindly across our tiny apartment to pee, pulled on my jeans and sneakers, and followed her down the five flights of stairs without a word, walking on tiptoes so I didn’t wake the neighbors.

We stopped in the foyer. Outside, my father was already working under the streetlights, breath steaming through his beard as he chipped ice off the windshield and loaded our bags and boxes into the hatchback of a rusted blue station wagon.

I glanced up at my mom again. Under the bare bulb she looked pale, though her skin was still much darker than mine. Her hair, which she’d kept short and dyed red as part of her disguise, was finally starting to grow out, straight and dark, nearly black, down to her shoulders.

She stood still in the doorway, cradling my baby brother in one arm and holding my hand with the other, but her eyes kept flickering to the intersection—following each car that passed, tracing the shadows of the men outside the bodega by the corner, keeping a close eye on anything that moved.

My father whistled twice, and my mom led me out through the glass door into the cold air of the street and into the back seat of our car, arranging the baby on her lap, turning to see that I was settled, and then cranking the heat up as high as it could go to coax us both back to sleep.

She nodded that we were ready. My father glanced back to see if anyone was following, winked at me in the rearview mirror, and swung our car onto Broadway, toward Interstate 80, heading west.

I was used to this routine. It wasn’t the first time we’d had to pack up all our things in the middle of the night and take off on another long cross-country drive. We ditched cars and apartments constantly, kept everything we owned in a few plastic milk crates by the door, and I carried my prized possessions in a backpack: a stack of comics, some crayons and paper, a couple of Star Wars action figures.

I liked to read comics while we drove—I couldn’t understand all the words yet, but I could at least look at the pictures—but that night, for some reason, my dad said it was too early to turn on the overhead lights; he

couldn’t see through the glare on the windshield and had to watch for deer and hitchhikers by the side of the road. So the lights stayed off.

I lay back and looked out the window instead, the yellow lane markers swallowed up behind us, the tree line blurring over by the edge of the road, while my parents whispered to each other across the dark front seat of our car:

“Who should we call? Who’s going to meet us there?”

“They know where we’re headed now.”

“They don’t know where we are.”

The hum of the engine, the hiss of tires on asphalt, the warm air inside, and the constant sense of forward momentum made me feel like we were our own little world, sealed off from the outside—and if we just kept going, kept driving, no one would ever catch us.

It was the closest I ever came to feeling totally safe in my family.

But we had to stop eventually, for food and gas, to use the bathroom and to stretch our legs. So, the next morning, I found myself standing in a long line with my dad at a rest-stop Burger King, watching a group of kids my age roughhouse on the indoor playground of a Kids Club Fun Center, when a nice elderly couple started talking to me, just making conversation.

“Hey sweetheart,” the old man smiled down at me—I had shoulder-length blond hair at the time, and everyone always assumed I was a girl —“you all on a road trip?”

I nodded. I knew enough not to talk to strangers.

“Chicago?”

I nodded again.

“Visiting family? Or just on vacation?”

I looked up at my dad. He wasn’t paying attention now; he was busy ordering our food, and I felt like I had to say something, just to put an end to this awkward conversation.

“We’re going to Chicago,” I told them, “for my mom to turn herself in.”

I was half-distracted, watching the other kids in their gold paper crowns running around the Kid’s Club gym, hanging from the bright plastic monkey bars. But I noticed the woman was looking at me now more closely, a bit confused.

“How do you mean, hon?”

“We made a deal,” I tried again. “With the FBI. So I can go to school.”

This was something I'd been told in passing, or overheard, without ever fully understanding what it meant, but as soon as I said it I knew—from the way the couple glanced at each other, and then over at my father's back—that I'd made a terrible mistake.

"Mister," the man cleared his throat to get my dad's attention. "Sorry. Your daughter here's saying something about . . . The FBI is looking for you all?"

My dad turned, surprised, and glanced down at me, trying to catch up to what had happened while he was talking to the teenager at the cash register.

"Oh. He's my son, actually."

This was not an adequate explanation, and the woman was now looking back over her shoulder, as if searching for help. "I don't know," my father shrugged, forcing a chuckle. "Maybe something he saw on TV? Hey, Z, you need to use the bathroom before we go? Say bye."

I waved. And before we even got our food, my dad picked me up and ran for our car.

My mom, nursing my brother in the passenger seat, looked up, instantly alert, as he pushed me into the back seat, slid behind the wheel, and peeled out onto the highway, his eyes locked on the rearview mirror.

"Hey. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just thought someone might have recognized me back there."

He was trying to protect me, I think; he knew I wouldn't want to disappoint my mom, to admit I had broken the strict codes of secrecy in the underground. But she didn't pursue it. She stayed calm and sharply focused, as usual.

"Slow down," she ordered him, as she reached for the glovebox and pulled out our faded road atlas. "Get off at the next exit. We'll switch to local roads."

I remember watching her face in the rearview mirror as she scanned the maps and glanced up at the horizon. In our family, my father was usually the one driving, but there was never any doubt who was really setting our direction. I used to wonder what she was thinking about, whether she was also scared—though that seemed impossible. She was, and is, the most committed, fiercely determined person I've ever known—the animating force of our family, the fuel that kept us all moving forward.

I loved her. I admired her. *I wanted to be like her.*

As I got older, of course, that all got more complicated. You grow up and you start to see how much you don't know about your own family. How much you assumed, or took for granted. You begin to see your parents' flaws and contradictions. You understand that not everything they told you could be true.

* * *

Ten years earlier, and seven years before my birth, a dynamite bomb exploded in a women's restroom at New York Police Department headquarters in Manhattan, crushing the three-foot cinderblock walls on both sides, blowing a tunnel through an empty elevator shaft, shattering windows for blocks around, and hurling sinks, toilets, and chunks of concrete across the street.

"It's unbelievable," Mayor John Lindsay told reporters at the scene. "Unbelievable. It's a very sad thing when people turn on the police who have been so responsible for preventing violence in this city."

A few weeks later, in July, another explosion shattered the glass and marble lobby of the Bank of America building, the international nerve center of the bank's trading and finance operations. And the same day, all the way across the country, a bigger bomb shook the U.S. Army base in the Presidio near the Golden Gate Bridge, damaging a Nike missile on display and punching a hole through the Armed Forces Police headquarters next door.

Then, in October, the pace picked up; over just a few days, a series of explosions wrecked a police monument in Chicago, the Marin County Hall of Justice, a Queens courthouse, and the Harvard Center for International Affairs. Later that month, my mother became only the fourth woman in history on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list.

It turned her overnight into a symbol—a heroic outlaw to some, an un-American terrorist to many more. That mugshot—with her straight dark hair, motorcycle jacket, and flat, defiant stare—would come to represent a nation, and generation, in crisis; a startling declaration that America's own sons and daughters had turned violently against their country.

Over the next eleven years, my mother would lead her small band of friends and fellow travelers into a running war against the U.S. government, targeting some of the most well-known, heavily guarded facilities on the

planet: FBI headquarters, the Capitol, the State Department, and the Pentagon. She would team up with California drug cartels and Black urban guerrilla groups to rob banks, break friends out of prison, and smuggle fugitives out of the country. She would grow up, have two children, and adopt a third, all while evading a nationwide FBI manhunt for over a decade. I was born during that decade, and spent the first years of my life underground.

INTERSTATE FLIGHT - MOB ACTION; RIOT; CONSPIRACY

I. O. 4364
4-24-70

WANTED BY FBI

BERNARDINE RAE DOHRN

FBI No. 56,360 H
20 0 9 R 010 12
L 17 R 010

OTHER NAMES KNOWN BY: Marion DelGado, Bernadine Dohrn, Bernardine Rae Ohrnstein, H. T. Smith

Photographs taken 1969

Bernardine Dohrn

DESCRIPTION
AGE: 28, born January 12, 1942, Chicago, Illinois
HEIGHT: 5'5"
WEIGHT: 125 pounds
BUILD: medium
HAIR: dark brown
EYES: brown
COMPLEXION: light olive
RACE: white
NATIONALITY: American
OCCUPATION: secretary
SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER USED: 395-38-5006

CAUTION
DOHRN REPORTEDLY MAY RESIST ARREST, HAS BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH PERSONS WHO ADVOCATE USE OF EXPLOSIVES AND MAY HAVE ACQUIRED FIREARMS. CONSIDER DANGEROUS.

A Federal warrant was issued on March 17, 1970, at Chicago, Illinois, charging Dohrn with unlawful interstate flight to avoid prosecution for mob action (Title 18, U. S. Code, Section 1073). A Federal warrant was issued on April 2, 1970, at Chicago, Illinois, charging Dohrn with violation of Federal Antiriot Laws and conspiracy (Title 18, U. S. Code, Sections 2101 and 371).

IF YOU HAVE INFORMATION CONCERNING THIS PERSON, PLEASE CONTACT YOUR LOCAL FBI OFFICE. TELEPHONE NUMBERS AND ADDRESSES OF ALL FBI OFFICES LISTED ON BACK.

Identification Order 4364
April 24, 1970

J. Edgar Hoover
Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D. C. 20535

Follow for extended description of Figure

My parents never lied to me about any of this—except maybe by omission. I knew, from my very earliest memories, that the FBI was hunting for us, but I never truly understood who—or what—"FBI" was. What had we done wrong? Why did they—or it?—want to catch us? And what would happen if they did?

I was too young to picture a government agency—a big concrete building full of hundreds of men poring over letters and photographs, wiretapping phones, breaking into apartments, all to catch our little family. Even if I'd been old enough to understand, it would have been impossible

to believe. To me, the FBI was just a dark, abstract presence—a childhood bogeyman—pursuing us all the time like a shadow out of a nightmare.

Whenever my parents left me in the car to run errands, or in a booth at a diner while they went to use a payphone, I'd hold my breath, scanning the adult faces outside, watching the clock up on the wall, terrified—maybe most kids are?—that this time my mom might not come back to get me at all. Because I always knew, without even having to ask, that whatever was chasing our family was mostly after her. And my worst fear at the time wasn't that we would all be caught but that "FBI" would find my mom when I wasn't around, that they would take her away—and leave me behind.

* * *

But life in our family could be fun, too.

When I was just three years old, I learned to recognize plainclothes police officers and undercover agents in a crowd, to make our calls from payphones and speak in code, to walk a trajectory—the complicated mix of turns and switchbacks we used in a city to lose a tail—watching from a rooftop or a fire escape to make sure our aboveground friends weren't being trailed as they walked their own trajectories: *up the stairs onto the elevated tracks, wait two minutes, then double back again, through the park, across the basketball courts, around a corner. You won't see us, but we'll find you.*

It was a bit like playing a game—a grown-up version of dress-up or make-believe—that only my family was good at, or knew all the rules.

And at every place we stopped for more than a week or two, my parents seemed to become different people. They found new jobs, dyed their hair strange colors, took on other names. Over the years, my mother went by Louise "Lou" Douglas, Rose Brown, Lorraine Anne Jellins, H. T. Smith, Sharon Louise Naylor, and Karen Lois DeBelius. My father, whom we all called Bill—part of his casual, anti-authority vibe—outside our family became Joe Brown, Tony Lee, Jules Michael Taylor, Hank Anderson, or Michael Joseph Rafferty, Jr. And like any kid, I wanted to be part of their grown-up world; I needed an alias. So even though no one knew my real name anyway, and I wouldn't have a birth certificate until I was five, around strangers they started calling me Z.

It all seemed normal. In our circle, pretty much everyone we knew was a fugitive. And over the years, I met other kids whose parents were also on the run, like mine, and who had grown up in a familiar situation and with a similar perspective. It felt a bit like being in a club—full of kids who knew what it was like to grow up underground, living on the margins of society, under assumed names, with no school or regular place to call home, all to fight for ideals that were too abstract for us kids to begin to understand.

My parents tried to explain it so that it could make sense to a four-year-old child: we were part of a rebel alliance, like Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, fighting an evil empire. (Bill and I had watched the original *Star Wars* at a second-run drive-in movie theater in Nevada.) We were bandits and outlaws, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, like Robin Hood. (We'd caught the animated Walt Disney classic on cable at a roadside motel.) So I knew, the way all kids "know," that my parents were heroes. We were the good guys. And if we were also criminals and fugitives—if my mom and dad had done things in the past that were dangerous and illegal—I knew they had done them for the right reasons. To help people. To make the world a better place. And I trusted that they had stopped taking those terrifying risks after I was born.

Because they always told me—and I believed, as one of the first tenets of my childhood faith—that my brother and I were their first priority, the center of their hopes and dreams for the future. And I was sure they would always protect us, no matter what.

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Road Map

(U.S. Interstate Highway System, 1979–81)

This is a beautiful country.
—John Brown's last words before his execution

"Rose" and "Z," in disguise, on a family road trip, underground, c. 1979.

In the glove compartment of every car, truck, or van we drove through the underground in those early days, my mom kept a rolled-up, dog-eared copy of the *Rand McNally Road Atlas* from 1977, the year I was born. It was illustrated with hand-drawn bubble cartoons in the style of *Sesame Street* or *Free To Be . . . You and Me*—big-nosed tourists and their shaggy kids taking

in the iconic sights of America: Abe Lincoln's cabin, Disneyland, the Washington Monument, and the U.S. Capitol.

I loved that atlas; the smiling cartoon families made me feel as if there could be something normal, even fun, about our never-ending road trips across the country. And as I got older, in the mornings, with the sun finally coming in through the rear windows, I'd sit cross-legged in the back of our car, or truck, or van, *Rand McNally Road Atlas* spread out on my lap, and trace our family's path along the spidery green veins of the U.S. Interstate Highway System.

We drove through the Badlands of South Dakota, past the Great Salt Lake and the blinding blankness of the Bonneville Salt Flats, up through the alien redwoods in the Avenue of the Giants and along the crumbling cliffside roads above the Klamath and Salmon rivers.

We'd turn back, usually, before the Canadian border and head south again, down Highway 1, across the desert to the Texas coast, east to Florida, and then all the way back north, to the now-familiar concrete high-rises and boarded-up brownstones of Harlem and the Upper West Side.

We spent time in communes in Oregon, at roadside motels and trailer parks in Virginia, with fugitive friends in flophouses in the slums of Detroit. But I noticed we never visited the tourist sites suggested by the *Road Atlas*. We never once stopped at Disneyland, or saw the Hoover Dam, or toured the Alamo. On the rare occasions we quit moving long enough to look around, it wasn't to celebrate icons of American innocence, ingenuity, or independence, but to visit monuments to injustice—the sites of lynchings and massacres and violent uprisings—so my brother and I could internalize radical lessons in solidarity and resistance.

In Chicago, instead of visiting the Sears Tower or my father's childhood home in the western suburbs, we went to the city's South Side to meet up with my parents' contacts from the Black Panther Party and to see the apartment where one of their friends had been murdered by police.

In New York City, instead of the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty, we visited memorials to the Harlem Rebellion and the Stonewall Uprising, and stopped by the West Village for a moment of silence outside the townhouse where three of my dad's closest friends had died.

We went to Harper's Ferry and John Brown's farm near Lake Placid; to Southampton, Virginia, the site of Nat Turner's slave rebellion; and to Florida's Osceola National Forest, named for the war chief whose name I

carry—my official birth certificate name, when I finally got one, was Zayd Osceola Ayers Dohrn—and who, my parents told me, had fought off white settlers and the U.S. Army during the Second Seminole War.

It turned out there was a whole buried landscape beneath the colorful cartoons and road maps in the *Rand McNally Road Atlas*, a vast archipelago of underground monuments to a different America—a country with a hidden, savage past and a violent present that could be dragged into a better future, apparently, only through constant acts of armed rebellion and suicidal self-sacrifice.

"These were freedom fighters," my mom would whisper to me, holding my baby brother in one arm, her free hand on my shoulder, as we stood in front of an old farm, a Chicago row house, or an open flatwood of pines. "This is where they were murdered. You're both named after freedom fighters too, remember? Zayd Osceola. Malik Cochise . . . You're both freedom fighters, too."

My mom and me, underground, c. 1979–80.

I was only three or four years old at the time. I didn't feel much like a freedom fighter. And given the gruesome, tragic ends that met most of my parents' heroes, I wasn't at all sure I wanted to become one.

I still have a crayon drawing I made of my mom around that time—a portrait of our entire family, in fact, though her giant face dominates the frame like a blazing desert sun. My father and I are two skinny stick figures squeezed into the margins, while my baby brother Malik is just a tiny smudge of crayon lost in a corner.

She loomed large like that in my imagination. A figurehead and a North Star. And also a mystery.

My father, Bill, has always been more of an open book. He's outgoing, talkative, and generous; he makes friends easily, and likes to chat and tell stories. People used to joke, in the underground, that you couldn't tell him a secret—where you were meeting other fugitives, or what target you were going to bomb next—because Bill was likely to tell the next stranger he met along the road.

It wasn't literally true. My father, like my mom, managed to evade a nationwide manhunt for over a decade, and he could keep a secret when he had to. But like most jokes, there's some truth to it. Strangers could spend an hour with Bill and feel as if they had become lifelong friends.

My mother was different. She was hard to get close to, even for her partner and her kids. She wasn't naturally warm or maternal. As I know now, motherhood was a role she had long resisted and found difficult to play. She was reserved and intense, focused and hard to read; she emanated a fierce determination and sense of purpose that could be daunting, intimidating, even scary at times.

But she sat up with me when I was sick, fetched cool washcloths for my forehead when I had a fever. She read me books every night before bed: Maurice Sendak, Margaret Wise Brown, and Dr. Seuss when I was a toddler; Mari Sandoz, Charles Dickens, and Alex Haley as I grew up. Later, when I went to college, she sent me works by Che Guevara and Assata Shakur, Sartre and de Beauvoir, Marx and Fanon—like my own private syllabus in revolutionary thought—so that she could reread the books alongside me and call my dorm on weekends to discuss what I thought.

She was also good in a crisis. When I was ten, I accidentally pulled down a folding ping-pong table on my face, pinning myself under the heavy metal frame and puncturing my left eye socket with a protruding screw. My mother heard me screaming and ran in to find me covered in blood, a wet strip of tissue hanging down my cheek like a deflated eyeball. She didn't flinch or hesitate. She pulled the 200-pound table off me, pressed her palm to my bloodied eye as she drove to the hospital, and carried me into the ER herself, glancing around like a general surveying her troops—demanding the attention of doctors and administrators, hand-picking my surgical team, and somehow, against all rules and regulations, staying in the hospital for three days to oversee my treatment and recovery herself. The doctors

grumbled about the broken rules, but the nurses whispered to us that her quick action had probably saved my eye.

She was like that—a fighter, a protector, and a natural-born leader, if those things can be born—with an icy calm and decisiveness that preempted any discussion or disagreement. The teachers at my school, the doctors in the hospital, the members of our family, even nature itself seemed to bend to her will.

One summer after I finished college, our family went back to one of the West Coast communes where we'd hid during our underground years. The August sun was intense, and my mom somehow got the idea that we should transplant a young willow tree closer to our cabin, to give us shade during the summer months. She mobilized a work crew—me and my younger brothers and my then girlfriend, now wife, Rachel—to dig up the sapling and transplant it to a better location, closer to the porch. It would be easy, she told us. The tree couldn't have been more than my shoulder height, its trunk about the width of a wiffleball bat.

It was no use arguing; we all knew that once my mother decided on a course of action, she would be stubborn to the point of unreason, that defying her or debating her was impractical, if not insane.

So we all put on our work clothes and started to dig. But right away, we ran into trouble; no matter how far away from the trunk we planted our shovels, they thudded into a dense, impenetrable tangle of wood—a plaited network of roots radiating out in all directions, a few inches below the soil. I didn't know it at the time, but willows are notorious for these tenacious root structures, which spread out horizontally in search of ground water and are a menace to gardeners, plumbing systems, and buried sewer lines everywhere. What this meant for our project was that the fragile-looking sapling was shaped like an upside-down umbrella, its canopy sunk deep underground, with only its slender handle visible. Uprooting it would have taken a backhoe and left behind a hole the size of a swimming pool. For our little work crew, the job was impossible.

We went back to the cabin to tell her so, even brought her out to the site to show her the problem. But my mother was unmoved. The difficulty, she told us, was irrelevant. The obstacles were beside the point. The thing had to happen. The only question was how we would get the job done.

We muttered mutinously under our breath. It was easy for her to give the orders, when we were the ones doing the digging. But none of us was

willing to tell her no to her face. So she went back to the cabin, and we all went back to work.

Finally, after three days, sunburned and bug-bitten, our hands raw and bleeding from the shovel and the pick, we revolted. I searched through the tool shed, found an axe, and we all hacked at the base of the sapling until we could tear it away from its roots—now like a pathetic umbrella shredded in a thunderstorm—drag it across the clearing to its appointed hole, pack dirt around its base to stand it up straight, and troop back to the cabin to tell my mom the job was finally done.

The tree was dead. We all knew it, including her. It stood there all summer long, slowly listing to one side, shriveling up, its bark turning pale, until it seemed like a sad joke and a symbol—a monument to her obsession, our defiance, and the futility of ever meeting her expectations.

Then, the following spring, it bloomed. Stems and leaves shot out of the sapling's sides and sprouted a mop at its crown. The tree grew, eventually over forty feet tall, its massive canopy overspreading our driveway and its vast network of roots expanding, invisibly, underground.

My mother got her shade. And over the years, that willow became a new inside joke for our family—and a different kind of symbol, a monument to my mother's indomitable will—a vision so vivid and defiant that the tree itself, like the rest of us, seemed to have no choice but to bend, to grow the way she wanted, and to manifest the future she saw.

* * *

It was a lot to live up to. My parents always made it clear, even when my brother and I were still toddlers, that the only acceptable purpose in life, given our gender and skin color—privileges we had never earned, birthrights that had in fact been stolen from others—was to find a way to fight for a better world. They showed us, in books and stories and by direct example, that white people in particular had a moral responsibility to be militant comrades in the struggle for Black liberation.

That didn't mean we had to feel guilty about ourselves. This wasn't some liberal guilt trip; my parents would have been offended if anyone called them liberals. Injustice, they taught us, shouldn't inspire guilt or self-loathing or paralysis, but radical rage. The system couldn't be reformed from within; it was too rotten, too corrupt. It had to be torn out by its roots,

reimagined, and fundamentally remade. Revolutionary change was the only way, and it would have to start with us.

But I never quite shared their sense of ideological conviction or black-and-white moral certainty. I never wanted to dedicate my life to a group or a political cause. And I never felt my parents' ready impulse to take to the streets—to blow things up or burn them down, to try to change the world.

That may be because, even as a child, I saw the costs of their kind of violent resistance up close. I spent most of my early years on the run. My mother went to jail when I was five. The parents of some of my closest friends went to prison for decades or died in that struggle. And the children of my generation—my brothers and I, and our fellow Weather Kids and Panther Cubs—had to live the rest of our lives in the shadow of our parents' revolution.

They left us a complicated legacy we could never quite live up to—most of us never wanted to. But as we grew up, as so often happens, history came back around again. Our own children, including my now-teenage daughters, find themselves facing a new era of American authoritarianism and racial reckoning, a new moment of widespread resistance and impetus for radical change. And it seems important, in such a moment, to grapple with my parents' history: to trace the path of one family, and a whole generation, through a half-century of revolutionary struggle in America; to try to make sense of a past I inherited; and to rethink some of the lessons I learned as a kid.

Because this is a funny thing about inheritance. It starts as something you receive, maybe reluctantly, from the past. But it becomes something you have to decide how to pass on to the future. Each of us has to choose for ourselves the parts of our legacy we want to embrace and what we want to reject or try to transform.

* * *

So in 2020, during the Covid pandemic, I started asking my parents questions about our family story. They were getting older. My mom had just turned eighty, my father seventy-eight, and I was worried about them—about their health and social isolation; worried that our shared history—my inheritance—might be lost before I ever got a chance to reckon with it.

That fall, I started biking over to my parents' apartment a couple times a week to visit and chat. Their place in Hyde Park, on the South Side of Chicago, is just a twenty-minute ride from my place downtown.

These visits were partly a way to keep busy, to stretch my legs and get out of our house—and my own head—during a time when most of us were locked down and stuck online. That year, I saw practically nobody in person except for Rachel and our girls, so we, along with my parents, made up our own little Covid bubble, and we could see one another without distancing or masks.

My parents always seemed happy to see me when I arrived. Bill would put out water and snacks and my mother would ask about my family, and then we'd sit—sometimes the three of us together, sometimes one-on-one—in their living room overlooking Lake Michigan, the walls plastered with posters of Nat Turner and Che Guevara, Harriet Tubman, Osceola, and John Brown. I'd put my phone on the arm of their couch to record a voice memo—only rarely switching it off to discuss something difficult or potentially dangerous.

"So, what's it like having me do this kind of research into your past?" I asked my mom early on, during one of our first one-on-one interviews.

"I . . . you know, it's wonderful that you're interested even . . ." She trailed off. "But it scares me."

She had silver in her hair now and a network of fine wrinkles across her tanned skin, but her green eyes were still focused and intense as always, narrowed slightly, watching me.

"Scares you? Why?"

"It worries me." She shrugged. "I don't know. The lines I've tried to keep . . . I think—by you doing this project, you've made me think—about other secrets . . . Like what to keep as a secret and what not to keep?"

I told her this was precisely what I hoped to talk with her about—that there are parts of my childhood I still don't fully understand, blank spots and contradictions that used to confuse or worry me, as a child, and even now, as an adult, make me curious—about her, and about us, as a family. Who we are, and what our story means for my kids.

"You were always a challenge." She narrowed her eyes and smiled, teasing me.

"A challenge. Why?"

“I don’t know. Because you were curious? And you knew we had a history. And you seemed to want to know more. So, it was always a challenge . . . To talk to you about it. To be honest and not implicate anybody.”

I told her I wasn’t trying to implicate anyone. I was just interested in learning more, while I could.

“You know, it’s funny.” She shook her head. “You’ll see when you’re this old—I hope you get to be this old—I think about my parents more now than I have for years and years. I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night—and think about my father. He was a silent type. He didn’t talk. He was hard to get close to.” She looked out the window, apparently lost in thought.

“You’ve got some of that, too,” I reminded her. “Not exactly silent, but reserved? Where do you think that comes from? The reserve? That distance? From grandpa?”

“I don’t know. Genes?” She laughed and shrugged. “You know, my dad cut himself off from his family for so long. It was ironic when I kind of replicated that pattern. Went on the run. Although it’s a very American, immigrant pattern, isn’t it?”

“Is it? I don’t know. It feels like you kind of broke that pattern, honestly. Nobody else in our family ever became a revolutionary, or a federal fugitive.”

She smiled again, suddenly, looking straight at me.

“Your kids might,” she said. “You never know.”

* * *

What makes a revolutionary?

In pictures of my mom when she was a girl, in 1950, she looks like a symbol of America’s postwar confidence—a precocious, slightly mischievous eight-year-old born into a nation proud of its past and hopeful about its future. A suburban kid, raised to believe in the American Dream.

Ten years later, when she was eighteen, she could have starred in a PSA for a new era of American optimism: a bright, ambitious co-ed, the first person in her family ever to go to college, poised to “make it” in a man’s world, shatter the glass ceiling, and lead her country into a new decade of progress.

But by 1970, when she was twenty-eight years old, Bernardine was a Most Wanted fugitive. The target of an international manhunt. The face of a generation gone violently off its rails. The CIA said she was “the most rabid female radical in the country.” FBI director J. Edgar Hoover called her “the most dangerous woman in America.”

So what happened? What changed her? What convinces a girl, or a whole generation of young people, to reject the world their parents made for them? And if they reject it—if they choose to burn down their own inheritance—what do they pass on to us in its place?

As my mother herself put it, speaking to reporters in 1970, just a few weeks before she left her family, disappeared into the underground, and declared war on her country, “We live here in America! We’re born in this country, too. And the notion that we’re outlaws has got to be put together with the fact that America created us!”

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Part 1

The Most Dangerous Woman in America

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

—Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Future FBI Most Wanted Fugitive, c. 1944.

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Bernard/ine

(Rogers Park, Chicago, 1944)

The first thing my mom remembers, from when she was not yet three years old, is sitting in the back seat of a brand-new Ford Super Deluxe coupe, watching her father's face in the rearview mirror and thinking how little she truly understood him.

It's funny how much that sounds like my own childhood.

Maybe that moment still stands out to her today because the drive itself was so unusual. Her family couldn't afford a car back then—they used public streetcars to get around their working-class neighborhood of Rogers Park, Chicago—but this was a special occasion. Her father, Bernard "Barney" Ohrnstein, an office clerk at the General Electric company, had borrowed this Ford from a friend to pick up his wife and new child—my mom's baby sister, Jennifer—from a maternity ward on the city's West Side. So, everything about this trip was unusual: the car's fancy leather interior, sealed off from the noisy chaos outside—the clang of trolleys and shouts of newsboys—the uncanny idea of bringing home a new sister she'd never met before, and the rare honor of spending some quiet time alone with her dad.

Or maybe she still remembers it now because something felt off about her father that day.

Barney had never been a big talker. Not mean, the way my mother remembers him, just silent and intimidating. "He never raised a hand to us," she told me simply. "He was scary mainly because he didn't talk very much." When he got home from work, Barney would usually sit alone in the living room, listening to a baseball game on the radio or reading a paperback from his Book of the Month club. On rare occasions, he might read to his daughter or let her read to him, and she looked forward to those moments—sitting on his lap, the smell of pipe tobacco. "It's nice," she

remembers. “It’s pungent and a little bit moist, but to me, very comfortable.”

When the family gathered every night for dinner, it was her mom who had to carry most of the conversation. My grandma Dorothy was the warm, cheerful presence in the family—a Swedish homemaker (her maiden name was Soderberg) with freckles and strawberry blond hair, who could usually draw her husband out, at least for a little while.

But on that drive to the hospital in 1944, Dorothy wasn’t around; she was laboring in the maternity ward. My mother and grandfather were alone in the car, and Barney seemed even more remote and inaccessible than usual.

My mother didn’t know it at the time, but her father had secrets.

“He wasn’t someone you really got close to,” her sister Jennifer says. “He was very sealed off. Man of few words. Harsh, often. He compartmentalized his life. So things in the past were not to be discussed again, or shared. It was as if they had ended. And especially painful things.”

Barney grew up in Chicago, in a working-class Jewish neighborhood called East Garfield Park. His father, Jacob Ohrnstein, a Russian immigrant, ran a small plumbing and gas equipment shop on Halsted Street. Pipe-fitting was the profession he had inherited from his own father, and Barney was expected to take over the family business one day.

But the neighborhood had been hollowed out by the first wave of suburban flight following the Great Chicago Fire. Damaged buildings were bulldozed into empty lots or rebuilt into low-cost tenement housing, and by the time Barney finished elementary school the area had become a near slum—a chaotic Jazz Age mix of immigrants looking for a foothold and poor Black folks drawn north in the Great Migration. There was fierce competition for the resources available, and people tended to stick to their own tribes.

“My father was a racist,” my aunt Jennifer told me bluntly. “He figured out early that it was going to be a struggle to get the American Dream. And to rise, if he was Jewish. He lived in fear of others, as if he and his community had to fight for whatever they could get.”

Their family was very poor. Barney and his sisters all slept in one bed, and their mother, Esther, had to scrimp and improvise to keep her children fed. For the rest of his life, my grandpa Barney hated the taste of dairy, which reminded him of the cloudy, watered-down glass of milk he had to

choke down every morning before school, the film-coated feeling on his tongue, and the jittery queasiness in his stomach after an entire day without solid food.

Jacob's pipe-fitting business never seemed to make enough money to support his growing family. Maybe as a result—or maybe he'd just always been this way—my great-grandfather was a hard, bitter, brutal man. "He beat everybody in the family," my mother told me. "Beat his wife, beat the kids." When Barney was just fifteen years old, he ran away from home—just left one day and never came back. He set off alone into 1920s Chicago, a roaring, inhospitable jungle for a kid without a family.

But my grandfather, it turned out, was a self-starter. Like many children of immigrants before and after him, he hustled and worked hard. Without even a high school diploma, Barney found himself an entry-level office job at GE. And with a modest weekly paycheck secured, he set about building a new family, marrying a pretty Swedish girl with freckles and strawberry blond hair.

This was not my grandmother Dorothy. In fact, it would be years before Barney and Dorothy met and started our particular line of the family tree. The 1920s was a different era in my grandfather's life—and the source of those secrets that would haunt his drive to the hospital with his daughter Bernardine almost twenty years later.

Still, the two time periods echo and mirror each other—as history often does. Both Barney's first and second marriages were "mixed" (Jewish–Swedish), which was unusual, even scandalous, at the time. He and his first wife were also both poor, with no family or connections to speak of—so it must have been a love match, and she became pregnant soon after the wedding.

Bernardine and Barney, c. 1944

My grandpa was a young man back then, proud of what he'd accomplished and optimistic about his future, chatting happily in the hospital waiting room with the other expectant dads, celebratory cigar tucked in his pocket, when the doctors came in to tell him that his wife and newborn baby had both died during childbirth.

And it took him years to start over. To bury his grief, in whatever way he could. To work his way through the Depression and find another Swedish girl he could marry—this one an orphan, parentless like him—named Dorothy. To father a child, finally, who lived—a girl he named Bernardine, after himself. "Bernard-ine"—you can almost feel his longing for a son.

No wonder my grandfather was quiet and thoughtful on that drive to the hospital in 1944, almost two decades after he lost his first family; Barney had kept this secret all that time. And he stayed quiet and reserved—even as Dorothy hemorrhaged after delivery and had to be wheeled into intensive care. Even as the doctors told him his new wife might not make it through, and his nightmare of two decades earlier seemed to be repeating itself.

My mom was sent to stay with relatives after the birth of her baby sister Jennifer. Here she is holding her own baby on that trip. December 7, 1944. Clinton, Illinois.

All my mom remembers from the rest of that week is being sent to stay with relatives at a farm downstate—her first solo train trip—so that her father could be alone while he waited for more news. Barney was used to starting over. He had rebuilt his life, more than once, from scratch. Maybe he was wondering if he would have to do it all over again.

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A Touch of the Exotic

(Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, 1951–59)

It's the well-behaved children who make the most formidable revolutionaries. They don't say a word, they don't hide under the table, they eat only one piece of chocolate at a time. But later on, they make society pay dearly.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, *Dirty Hands*

The Ohrnsteins. Easter, 1955: Bernardine on the left, holding white kid gloves.

The baby would survive—Bernardine's little sister, my aunt Jennifer—and my grandmother Dorothy would recover, too, though she could never get pregnant again. She and Barney would never have a son.

In 1951, they moved their family to Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, a middle-class suburb just north of Milwaukee. Barney had found a new,

better-paying job, as credit manager of a Midwest appliance retail chain. The Ohrnsteins would have their own two-story home now, and their own Ford parked in the driveway.

"My parents were into a whole thing of having a house with a yard, having a dog and protecting us from the big bad city, Jennifer remembers. "My sister and I got our own bedrooms. We had a basement and backyard and lots of kids on the block. So it was really quite a wonderful thing."

That first night in their new home, the girls were excited, running upstairs to explore their new bedrooms. But the gas hadn't been turned on yet, and the house was cold. After it got dark, Barney set up a coil heater in the bathroom so the girls could get ready for bed while he and Dorothy finished unpacking the kitchen downstairs.

My mom was eight years old, my aunt Jennifer was six, and they were standing together at the sink brushing their teeth, Jennifer up on a stool, when Bernardine started to scream. Her baby sister was on fire.

"I started running around the second floor," Jennifer remembers, "as these flames consumed my bathrobe and up into my hair and I thought I was dying. My father flew up the stairs and caught me and threw me down on the floor and beat the flames out with his bare hands. I remember screaming to him the whole time, 'Don't let me die! Don't let me die!'"

Jennifer didn't die, though she was scorched and terrified, and practically nothing was left of her robe. But the skin on Barney's hands was almost completely gone. Saving his daughter had seared his palms down to the muscle.

He was bedridden for weeks, his hands bandaged lumps of blistered flesh. And for the rest of his life, my grandfather's palms would be smoothed over with a layer of pink scar tissue—which seems appropriate, somehow, for him. Barney was shedding his old skin. Starting over. Once again, he was about to become something new.

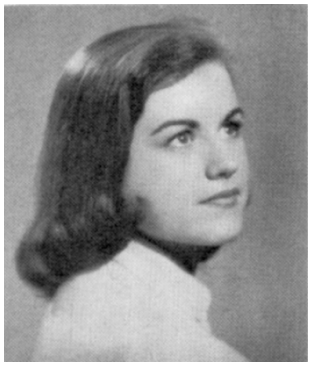
* * *

Barney's great dream was to become a lawyer. He even took correspondence courses, according to my mom, "literally from the back of a matchbook." But he never enrolled in law school. He would later claim his mother died the day of the exam and he had to withdraw to deal with her affairs. His daughters secretly suspected he couldn't pass the entrance test,

or couldn't afford it. Upward mobility at the appliance chain also remained stubbornly out of reach, and Barney would remain a low-level office worker for the rest of his career.

But despite those setbacks—or maybe because of them, since they focused his imagination on his glimmering, always-receding future—my grandfather never lost faith in America as the land of opportunity. He believed in the Horatio Alger myth of hard work and the self-made man. In 1952, he voted for Republican senator Joe McCarthy, who ran on the populist slogan "McCarthyism is Americanism with its sleeves rolled!" Whatever frustrations he had—whatever thwarted ambitions—Barney would channel them into his daughters, and especially his firstborn, Bernardine. He was determined that his namesake would carry on his American Dream.

Bernardine grew up to be quiet and reserved, a lot like her dad—driven, ambitious, and determined to succeed. In high school, she was an outstanding student (ranked 15th in a class of 227) and what a college admissions counselor might call well-rounded. She was treasurer of the modern dance club, special page editor of the *Tower Times*, and a member of the Youth Council, pep club, Future Nurses, and the National Honor Society.



My mother's yearbook photo, 1958.

I asked my mother about what she was like in high school, and she said she mostly remembers feeling out of place—not an outcast, but definitely not popular either. She worked hard to fit in, dressing on trend in cashmere sweaters, round-collared Villager dickeys, and black Capezio flats, and tried to keep her head down, focusing on her schoolwork. Her classmates and teachers—mostly quoted a decade later, after she had become a notorious

revolutionary—sound like people who can't believe their nice, normal-looking neighbor turned out to be a serial killer.

"The most remarkable thing about Bernardine was how absolutely ordinary she was," remembered one female classmate from Whitefish Bay High. "The whole family was very, very normal."

"She was a good scholar, an active, attractive young lady," recalled principal J. Harold Rose. "She was selected to represent the school at Badger Girls' State [an American Legion-sponsored mock political convention]. Only outstanding young women are selected for the honor. This is the caliber of person we all thought she was. Everything I can say about the girl I knew is positive. I never thought of her doing what she is doing now."

But even as people seem at pains to show how *normal* my mother was, you can catch glimpses of the future rebel peeking out from the mysterious ellipses in the published descriptions of her all-American façade. "I dug her a lot," recalled one male acquaintance. "She was just a good girl and a pretty girl . . . Intelligent, aware, and sensitive . . . I always figured she could see through a lot of the phoniness about everything." And a Milwaukee man who claimed to have dated Bernardine as a teenager (but wouldn't give his name to reporters in 1971) recalled, suggestively, "She was on her way back in high school. She was trying to get ahead. She used to have parties at her home—drinking and smoking—not wild, but you understand . . ."

This would become a running theme in my mother's life—the innuendo, and male fixation on her looks and sexuality—even though, to hear her tell it, Bernardine was still a virgin in high school, bookish, reserved, and painfully shy. It didn't matter. Her emotional reserve, coupled with a then-masculine-coded ambition and rejection of social norms, was a blank screen that allowed people to project onto her their own preconceptions, and would soon transform Bernardine into a kind of Rorschach test for an entire country itself in the midst of a profound transition.

But all that comes later. In 1958, people just didn't know what to make of her. Bernardine's yearbook senior profile would simply describe her, with yet another mysterious, suggestive ellipsis, as having "a touch of the exotic . . ."

* * *

Barney was proud of his daughter's achievements—her extracurricular clubs and straight-A report cards. And he was determined to give his girls a shot at the opportunities he felt he had missed. So, he told the family, he was making a change.

"He announced one night at bedtime, when I was thirteen, that we were going to court the next day because we were changing our last name," Jennifer told me. "I felt ashamed and embarrassed. I think it was probably much harder for my sister because she was already in high school. The following day, we just had to go into school and she had a different last name. It was one of those shocking moments of, 'We're hiding something—there's something secret in this family that's shameful.' And it never sat right."

Barney had his surname legally changed, dropping the "stein" and adding a D in a nod to his wife, Dorothy. Overnight, the Ohrnsteins became the Dohrns. Which, when you think about it, is the most American thing in the world: to change your name and break from your past, like Jay Gatsby or Marilyn Monroe, and create a new identity to match your bright, imagined future.

My grandpa Barney had worked his whole life to assimilate, to seem "more American," with his blond wives, Milwaukee Braves baseball caps, and conservative, anti-Communist politics. He had tried to disguise his "touch of the exotic," but now he was middle-aged, resigned to his position, thinking less about himself and more about his legacy—what he could pass on to his children and his children's children. Maybe Barney had finally realized that the opportunity he'd chased his whole life had never really existed, at least not for outsiders like him. He wanted his daughters, and even his unborn grandchildren, to be unencumbered by his past.

"Students gossiped about the name change," recalled a later newspaper profile of my mom, "but Bernardine explained simply that Dohrn was easier to spell and pronounce. Some of her former classmates said she was upset about it, but, if it did bother her, she didn't allow it to hamper her school life."

"The lesson she seemed to extract from the episode," claimed far-right commentator David Horowitz, one of Bernardine's fiercest later critics, "had nothing to do with anti-Semitism . . . but with the fact that you could become who you said you were." And this rings true to me, somehow, in spite of its hostile source. Knowing my mother and what would happen

next, I can see that she had learned something from Barney Ohrnstein about the malleability of identity: that in America you could *choose* the past you inherited and *invent* the person you wanted to be.

And by the time she left home, at seventeen, the first person in her family to go to college, Bernardine, like her father a few decades earlier, was ready to become something new.

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The Ugly Duckling

(Sun City, Florida, 1980)

I was surprised, as always, by how easy the act of leaving was, and how good it felt. The world was suddenly rich with possibility . . . Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road.

—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

Dorothy and Barney Dohrn, outside their home in Sun City, Florida.

The first time I met my grandparents, Barney and Dorothy, was just outside their retirement community in Sun City, Florida, around 1980. My parents were still underground, and they drove me and my brother all the way down from New York City for the visit. We met up in a campground and sat together at a paint-flaked picnic table, surrounded by the noise of other families, the drone of traffic in the distance, and the buzzing of mosquitos and flies.

My grandma cried a lot during that visit. She was happy to see us, to meet her young grandchildren for the first time; she spoiled me with lemon candies and deep-fried Swedish rosettes she'd brought in a wicker basket, but she was terrified we might be arrested or killed. Her eyes darted around the campground, looking for FBI agents hidden behind the palm trees, and her fingers shook as she pressed her daughter's hands.

My grandparents had fumblingly followed my mother's instructions to walk a trajectory before we met, to lose any police tails, to stay off their home phone, which was definitely bugged. But they were profoundly out of their depth; they knew nothing about being fugitives or evading an FBI manhunt, and they were visibly scared to be even tangentially involved.

Mostly, they just seemed bewildered by their daughter's transformation, and by the new person she had become. Dorothy and Barneyhad always valued comfort, fitting in, family, and community; they couldn't understand why their child had become so violently opposed to their way of life, to the values they'd taught her, and to the country they both loved.

My grandparents had moved to Florida the day Barney turned sixty-five and retired. They lived in a small, two-bedroom brick bungalow with a well-tended front lawn and orange and lemon trees out back. They ate tuna casserole and Jell-O salad on faux wood TV trays while watching *Wheel of Fortune* and *The Price Is Right*. The Dohrns weren't wealthy—their lifestyle was modest, their weekly budget carefully kept—but in retirement they could at least pretend (with the help of their weekly Social Security checks) to be comfortably middle-class. Dorothy spent her afternoons at bridge club. Barney, with his well-trimmed white mustache, pink slacks, and patent leather shoes, kept busy in retirement, helping to start Sun City's first public library, organizing its first volunteer ambulance service, and relaxed by playing golf and lawn-bowling on weekends. The Dohrns had finally achieved their own modest, delayed version of the American Dream, living off the safety net of the Great Society (despite regularly voting against it), surrounded by well-tended golf courses, picturesque palm trees, and other retirees who looked very much like them.

For me, watching them interact with my parents at the picnic table, it was simply impossible to imagine my mother emerging from their world. She was just so profoundly unlike them—not only in her politics, but in her most basic essence. She seemed to have *created* herself, rather than being molded, as we all are, by a mix of her genetics and formative years.

Barney and Dorothy both looked the part of white suburban retirees, dressed in colorful prints and polyester pastels, as if they were constantly on their way to a golf outing. Their daughter, on the other hand, had grown up dark-eyed and fierce, in boots and blue jeans with no makeup, her skin bronzed and weathered after our long trips through the California desert and along the Texas coast. It was as if she'd been switched at birth, born a member of a different species. And it reminded me of a kids' book I loved, *The Ugly Duckling*—only instead of a swan, Bernardine was a bird of prey, a hawk or eagle, hatched into the wrong nest and ludicrously expected to follow the other fluffy white chicks in a line, even though her radical nature (radical, from the Latin *radix*, meaning "root") had always been sharp, solitary, and fierce.

As I grew up—as it became clear to me that most of us, as we mature into adulthood, become more and more *like* our parents—it seemed all the more striking that my mother had become so completely *other*. I used to daydream about whether, and how, I might do the same thing—define my own identity, separate and distinct from my strange upbringing. And I often wondered, on that first trip to Florida and many times since, how my mother had managed to move so far away from her original context, to reject her own past and chart such a remarkably different future.

The answer, I now understand, is that, like most of us, she had inherited much from her parents. But she was also a unique mix of nature and nurture—a complex individual, with her own inimitable patterns of thought, coming of age against the backdrop of a particular family and culture, and also irreversibly shaped by the context of her times.

And in 1959, the year Bernardine finally left home, those times were about to change. Radically.

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Freedom Summer

(Ohio/Chicago, 1960–64)

I don't know if I'm unhappy because I'm not free, or if I'm not free because I'm unhappy.
—Patricia (Jean Seberg), in Jean-Luc Godard's film *Breathless*, 1960

Bernardine getting ready for college, c. 1959–60.

If my mother hoped going away to college would be an adventure—a chance to escape her sheltered, suburban childhood—her first choice of school was a misstep. The University of Miami at Ohio turned out to be even more stifling and provincial than Whitefish Bay. Male students had no curfew and were allowed to live off campus, but college "girls" were still required to live in residence halls strictly supervised by a Head Resident, and expected to be home by 10 p.m. or risk disciplinary action.

Bernardine hated the place right away. The campus culture seemed to her silly and old-fashioned, stuck in an early-1950s all-American soda fountain aesthetic she was, at eighteen, already trying desperately to shed. Still, she says, she was eager to fit in, to find some sense of belonging and community in this new, unfamiliar place. A week after she arrived, when the university's Greek organizations held their annual rush week, she decided to join up, making the rounds with her freshman roommate to socials, interviews, and high-stakes meet-and-greets with Miami of Ohio's eighteen sororities.

She was rejected by every single one. The sisters had done their research—calling around to contacts back in Milwaukee to ask about the new pledge's background. And they let Bernardine know, to her face, she was being shunned because she was Jewish.

"I was just blindsided," my mother told me. "It was 1959. And it's southern Ohio, which I didn't realize is really *the South*. It's this far from Kentucky." She held up her fingers to show me how far. "And literally people asked me, like, 'Do you have a tail?'"

Back in Whitefish Bay, Bernardine had always felt accepted, even if she was considered a bit mysterious and aloof. She never worried that her family's background would make her an outcast. Her mother wasn't Jewish, which meant, according to Jewish law, that Bernardine wasn't either. But here in rural Ohio, even her "touch of the exotic" apparently marked her definitively as an outsider. And being shunned like this was a new and humiliating experience for her.

So she kept her rejection secret. She couldn't bear to tell her friends back home—let alone her proud parents—that kids in America's heartland could see right through Barney Ohrnstein's blond wife, suburban home, and clumsy name change. "I couldn't tell my parents," she says now. "What did they know about any of this? And how can I tell them that being Jewish has hurt me?"

But she sleepwalked through the rest of her school year, despising the corn-fed WASPiness of her classmates and the claustrophobic Ohio campus. "I was so lost," she told me. "I just felt alone. I didn't have enough strength to be angry. So I was sad instead. And the place you'd go, in Oxford, Ohio, if you wanted to be alone, was the cemetery."

She laughed as she said this, acknowledging the angsty adolescent cliché. "Most people avoided it," she went on. "I thought it was beautiful.

Just a quiet place where there wasn't a crowd. You know, I was trying to see myself as this dramatic alone person."

Bernardine made no real friends in college. She stayed an outcast. And when, at the beginning of her sophomore year, she caught rheumatic fever and was forced to take a medical leave, it felt almost like deliverance. A second chance. She had an excuse to start over again.

* * *

A year later, back in Wisconsin, under doctor's orders to convalesce at home, Bernardine still felt paralyzed, unsure what to do next. Whitefish Bay seemed even smaller and more stifling than she remembered, with Dorothy tending to her like a child, bringing her cookies and milk in bed, Barney barricaded in the living room, hiding his worry and disappointment behind a Book of the Month paperback and his typical stony silence.

My mother still wanted an adventure. She wanted to grow up and do something exciting with her life. She just wasn't sure what, or where, or even how to begin. She remembers going out that summer with a guy from Milwaukee, on a set-up like something out of *The Graduate*. "We went on a date," she told me. "Both of us were miserable. It was fixed up by our parents. But he's the one who said, 'For a smart girl, you're really stupid. You should go somewhere where you can get a good education.' And I did think about hitting him—but I said, 'Like where?' And he said, 'I don't know, go to the University of Chicago.'"

She laughed again as she said this—my mom thinks it's funny that this life-changing idea was suggested by some random guy on a bad blind date. But as a nineteen-year-old kid, she was apparently desperate for a new idea. A vibe shift. She made her mother drive her down to Chicago to visit the Hyde Park campus. And in the fall of 1961, Bernardine officially transferred to the University of Chicago—her first time back in the big city since she was four.

It was another strange choice for a soon-to-be revolutionary.

Then, as now, UChicago had a reputation as a place for smart kids who are socially awkward and constitutionally conservative—the place where "fun comes to die." The university billed itself—and still does—as a bulwark against fashionable ideas and political correctness, proudly committed to the values of a traditional classical education. Its best-known

professors at the time were right-wing economists and political scientists like Milton Friedman, Aaron Director, and Leo Strauss—interestingly, themselves often Jewish intellectuals who had soured on their own youthful radicalism.

But this was 1961, and change was already in the air. The UChicago campus—an ivory tower enclave set in one of the most segregated cities, and most integrated neighborhoods, in the nation—was on the verge of a full-blown racial reckoning.

* * *

Bernie Sanders, now the socialist senator from Vermont and former presidential candidate, had recently arrived as a transfer student, like my mom. One day, on the hunt for cheap off-campus housing, Bernie and some of his friends stumbled across a badly kept secret: Brokers of university-owned apartments were refusing to rent to Black students. Though this was a surprise to Brooklyn-bred Bernie, it wasn't really new; the university's efforts to exclude Black people from its Hyde Park campus went back decades.

Black residents had initially been kept out of Hyde Park by unwritten racial quotas and redlining, but in 1948 the U.S. Supreme Court (in *Shelley v. Kraemer*) ruled those racial covenants unconstitutional. Black people started to move in, and white residents began to flee. By the end of the decade, Hyde Park had become almost 40 percent Black—one of the most racially mixed neighborhoods in the country—and the university, worried about falling property prices and parents' perception of rising crime near campus, was desperate to stop the trend.

Over the following decade, school administrators championed a series of "urban renewal" and "slum clearance" projects that demolished dozens of city blocks and displaced thousands of Black residents—all supposedly for new student dorms, though the dorms were never built and the land was eventually used for the university's athletic fields.

Outraged by what he learned of this history, Bernie Sanders soon became a leading activist and rabble-rouser at UChicago; as chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality's social action committee, he led a series of protests in 1961 and 1962 against housing discrimination by the university and racial segregation in the city at large.

My mom wasn't part of the protests—she didn't know Bernie at the time, and didn't yet consider herself political. But people, like nations, are often shaped imperceptibly by currents in the culture long before any outward change in action. And those early-Sixties student protests would set the tone for a new decade, for my mother, and for many college kids like her—a call to venture beyond their own cultural red lines and discover the larger world outside their ivy-covered walls.

Bernardine started going to jazz and blues clubs in Chicago every weekend, attended poetry readings, rock concerts, and every folk music "happening" she could find. She became a regular at the student-run Doc Films movie club, just in time to catch the rebellious spirit of the French New Wave—Agnès Varda and *Breathless* and *The 400 Blows*.

By her junior year, the university's Hyde Park campus had started to feel much too small for the big, exciting life she now wanted to lead. It wasn't quite Miami of Ohio, but women were still a tiny minority at UChicago; Resident Assistants patrolled the dorms at night, and co-eds entertaining young men had to leave their doors open and keep one foot on the floor at all times. (Apparently this was considered enough to prevent the worst kinds of bad behavior.)

Bernardine decided to move into an off-campus apartment—to shed the stifling supervision of the dorms and be closer to the city she now loved. Her parents panicked. From what little they gathered in her weekly postcards and Sunday morning phone calls, their daughter's life seemed to be spinning out of control—a single girl living alone in the big city without a chaperone? Barney drove down from Wisconsin, determined to bring her home.

When my mom talks about this today, she still sounds like that rebellious nineteen-year-old in 1962. "I moved into an apartment, and they totally opposed it!" she told me. "They said, 'You can't do this.' But I already did it! And I'm doing it! And blah blah blah."

She and Barney went back and forth on this for a while, until it started to feel like the whole argument was actually about something else. "It was about sex, obviously, underneath everything," my mom told me. "Nobody was talking about sex, but it was obviously all about sex. What else could it be about?"

These were, in fact, the earliest days of America's sexual revolution. The first mass-market birth control pill, Enovid, had just recently been

approved by the FDA and was starting to make its way into pharmacies across the country. And even though Bernardine was still completely naive about sex—she says she barely understood the “dangers” her father was warning her about—the culture was shifting rapidly around her, and she, like millions of other college kids, was determined to keep up.

Barney drove back to Whitefish Bay alone to break the news to Dorothy; his intervention hadn’t worked. My mom moved into her off-campus place with a female roommate, Rosa Levine, but without a chaperone. And that spring, in 1963, she met her first real boyfriend—Robert Okin, who was then studying at UChicago to be a psychiatrist.

“He was such a brilliant and lovely and totally fucked-up guy,” she told me. “He had a powerful, demanding father. The whole time we were together, he was in analysis. And it’s hard to be with somebody who’s in analysis when you’re not! So I tried. I got assigned to somebody. He [the analyst] was only four years older than me. Never said a word. I never said a word. We had many, many sessions of total silence. I was supposed to break, and it was all supposed to work. But it never worked. I never broke.”

This is very typical of my mother; she’s skeptical of psychological insights and explanations and doesn’t like people trying to get inside her head—including me. Still, she found Bob Okin fascinating—he was smart, sophisticated, and proudly Jewish, very different from the boys she had known back home. “He was always kind to me,” she says simply. “Sweet. He was a great first boyfriend for me.”

She and Bob dated all year. The next summer, in 1964, he took her on a cross-country road trip on his Vespa to meet his family in New York. They slept in fields along the way, buying their food at local markets and picnicking in the grass, which sounds both romantic and silly to me, like most early college relationships. But for Bernardine, this was all brand-new: first cross-country road trip, first sex, first love—a whole new world opening up in front of her, full of adventure and surprise.

Bob’s home in Rye, New York, turned out to be a mansion. His father, Milton Okin, a Jewish Communist and biochemist, had invented a diet supplement made from the tropical acerola fruit, patented the name Weight Watchers, and struck it rich. The Okins played tennis. They had servants. They talked about books and politics and plays over dinner. For my mother, this was a world she had only read about and imagined—like something out

of an Edith Wharton novel, overwhelmingly decadent and seductive and strange.

She stayed with Bob's family about a week and then took a train down to Baltimore to visit her Chicago roommate, Rosa Levine. Rosa's family turned out to be wealthy, too. "You walk in and you see in the living room—a Modigliani!" my mom remembers, still amazed by the idea. "At college, we all had Modigliani *posters*. This was a Modigliani! And then going up the stairs to the guest room where I slept was a Van Gogh. Original! You just don't see that in people's houses. It was unbelievable."

If my mother had been a different kind of person—if she'd been more like her father, maybe—the wealth of her new classmates could have inspired a different kind of longing: the *Brideshead Revisited* ambition of a scholarship kid at an elite university, driven to make money or at least to marry rich. So maybe Bernardine wasn't much like her father after all. Or maybe the world was just changing too fast for Barney's 1950s dreams to keep up. Because that summer, even as she was traveling back across the country on Bob's Vespa, Bernardine was listening to the news on the radio. And for a passionate, idealistic kid in 1964, the news could be life-changing.

* * *

That summer, three young civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—had gone south together to register Black Southerners to vote. Along the way, they stopped to visit a church in Mississippi that had been burned down by the Ku Klux Klan. As they left the church they were pulled over by police, supposedly for speeding, and spent the rest of the afternoon in jail. When they were finally released, the three young activists were followed by marked cruisers and a few private vehicles driven by members of the White Knights, a racist community organization.

One of the men in those cars had weeks earlier warned his neighbors about a coming "nigger–communist invasion of Mississippi" and urged them to mobilize "a secondary group of our members, standing back . . . armed and ready to move. It must be an extremely swift, extremely violent, hit-and-run group!"

The cops hit their sirens and pulled the three over at an exit, away from the main highway—where no one could see or hear what happened next. James Chaney, the only Black man in the group, must have sensed something—he jumped out of the car and started to run.

The men chased him down, beat him bloody, and castrated him. They shot Goodman and Schwerner at point blank range, set their car on fire, and then dumped the three bodies in a dug-up dam on a nearby farm, still half-alive. An autopsy would find that Andrew Goodman had inhaled some of the mud from his shallow grave.

Even more shocking, when the FBI finally dredged the rivers, ponds, and swamps of the surrounding area, they found the corpses of eight Black men, including two civil rights workers whose disappearance a month earlier hadn't made the national news. Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, in other words, were the most well-known victims of the "Mississippi Burning" murders, but they were far from alone.

Those killings were clearly meant to be a deterrent, to discourage young Yankee activists from coming south to meddle in Mississippi's affairs, but they had precisely the opposite effect. In spite of the now-obvious danger—or maybe because of it, because it made the stakes so vivid, the moral urgency so clear—a new wave of young activists, both Black and white, flooded south to join the cause. Civil rights was the calling of a generation. And people all across the country were choosing sides.

My mom decided to join up—to travel south to help save American democracy from the threat of violent white Christian nationalism. She told her boyfriend Bob, "I want to go south. I'm gonna go volunteer." And he said, "Absolutely not. No. You can't."

The disagreement wasn't moral or political. Bob was a liberal, like Bernardine was then, and he supported civil rights. He simply didn't want his girlfriend to go south without him.

"Medical school never stopped," my mom says. "You know, he was doing research. He was growing cells. He had to go feed his cells every day!" She says this laughing, as if it's ridiculous to work in a lab when you could choose to go south to fight racism, but I can't help but feel sympathetic to Bob's position. After all, there's nothing wrong with medical research—far from it. In fact, Dr. Robert Okin would go on to be the head of psychiatry at San Francisco General, where he spent decades fighting for human rights for the mentally disabled. So this isn't a story of commitment

vs. cynicism, or activism vs. complacency. Not all idealists become revolutionaries, and there's more than one way to change the world.

Still, I can sympathize with my mom's position, too. She had her own ambitions, and her own awakening sense of possibility and purpose. At twenty-one, she had already challenged society's ideas of what a young woman could be: she'd gone off to college, moved away from home, defied her father to live on her own. Now she had to tell her older boyfriend, another man she loved and respected, that she was going south over his objections. To risk her life. Without him.

She couldn't do it. Apparently, this was too much defiance, even for her.

"We had a big fight about it," she told me, "and I . . . collapsed. I didn't want to lose him. Partly because I really cared about him. Partly because I didn't know anybody else. I would have been starting from scratch."

This is a part of my mother's story that continues to surprise me. My entire life, I don't think I've ever seen her back down from a confrontation, even when she was in the wrong, or let anyone, especially a man, tell her what to do. She's the most defiant, fiercely independent, willful person I've ever met. Weakness is unlike her. So is ambivalence. Or cowardice.

But at twenty-one she was apparently a different person, or an embryonic version of the woman she would later become. Because Bernardine stayed in Chicago that year, while thousands of other young people just like her risked their lives to try to change the world. And it stuck with her, the feeling of guilt and inadequacy. It made her sick of herself. So, a year later, when she found herself, almost by accident, at the very center of the country's violent struggle for racial justice, she wouldn't hesitate. She would meet, and be inspired by, two of the most famous and controversial men on the planet. She would become an up-close eyewitness to history. And it would set her on the path to revolution.

"I did feel like I should have gone south," she told me. "And I didn't. And so, I was like, This time, I'm not going to miss it."

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She-Wolf of the Revolution

(On the Road, 1965–68)

Whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms, singing "We Shall Overcome"? You don't do that in a revolution. You don't do any singing; you're too busy swinging.

—Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots"

Bernardine at her University of Chicago graduation, 1965.

Instead of going south for Freedom Summer, my mother applied to law school. She says now this was kind of an accident, a convenient fallback plan for an indecisive college grad. But I don't think it could have been entirely a coincidence that she was choosing to fulfill her father's lifelong ambition, grasping for the American Dream that Barney Ohrnstein had imagined for himself.

"My father always had the dream of being a lawyer," says my aunt Jennifer. "So my sister was stepping into his footsteps as the firstborn."

The summer after she graduated, Bernardine requested a meeting with the Dean of Admissions at University of Chicago Law School to talk about her future. The interview didn't go well, at first. "He said to me, 'We don't take women,'" she told me. "'Do you know why? Because you're going to get married and waste the degree.'"

But Bernardine had already broken up with Bob Okin—their argument over Freedom Summer had accelerated the end of their youthful relationship. She was single now, and independent. And she wasn't going to let another man tell her what to do—not now, not ever. "Don't worry," she assured the dean. "I'm *never* getting married." And she was admitted to the UChicago Law School class of 1967.

If Bernardine had been outnumbered as a co-ed, law school was truly a man's world—she was one of only six women among 130 students in her 1-L class. "Only two or three—Bernardine among them—were at all serious," remembered a male classmate. "The rest were there to get laid or married." "She took a lot of male snickering from the guys," recalled another student. "She was well known because of her looks, and she always wore shorter miniskirts than anybody else."

But a third classmate from the time remembers Bernardine as "extremely bright and very serious. She was a liberal Democrat in her politics then, and her main concern was integration. In those days, you have to remember, the Justice Department was still the good guys, and lawyers were instrumental in getting justice for Black people. That's how Bernardine viewed the law—as a way to get good things done."

That summer, when the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Chicago to lead a series of protests against housing discrimination, Bernardine jumped at the chance to volunteer. This felt like an opportunity to make up for her earlier hesitation, to do something that might actually matter. And as it turned out, the movement desperately needed lawyers—ideally, people willing to work for free. So the day she arrived, Bernardine, an unlicensed, inexperienced second-year law student, found herself face to face with Dr. King himself—the most famous, most inspiring, most *intimidating* civil rights leader of his generation.

And just like in some horrifying naked dream, he immediately called her out. "He asked me to do research to find out who were the biggest slumlords in Chicago," she told me. "I knew nothing. Nothing! Second-year

law student. I knew very little about landlord–tenant law. I had an armband that said Legal. It was ridiculous!"

Her impostor syndrome was real, but she was still determined to do a good job. "So I went to the law librarians," she went on. "They were all women, of course, the only women working in the building. And they were great. [But] all the slums were all held in blind trusts. We couldn't identify the landlords. I was devastated. I was going to have to go back—I thought maybe he'd forget and not bring it up at the meeting? I was really horrified. So, when the next meeting happened, King called on me, right away. And I had to say 'We can't identify them.' And that's when he said, literally right on the spot, 'Never mind. We'll call a city-wide rent strike!'"

My mother says this now with awe in her voice—still amazed, all these years later, that Dr. King could be so decisive, so impatient with delay, and so immediately willing to switch tactics and take action. King, after all, wasn't a lawyer, or a politician. He wasn't going to wait for the courts or the law professors to tell him what was possible. He was ready to bring the country's contradictions out into the open.

* * *

On August 5, 1966, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led a march through Chicago's all-white Gage Park neighborhood—"a full-scale assault," he called it, on the city's legacy of housing injustice. "I've been in many demonstrations all across the South," he told reporters at the scene, "but I have never seen, even in Mississippi and Alabama, mobs as hostile and as hate-filled as I've seen here in Chicago."

Bernardine was with him, marching just a few rows back—she could see his head, at the front of the crowd—while on all sides white counter-protestors swarmed the streets, or watched from their porches, or stood in their yards, screaming insults. Waving Confederate flags. Throwing things.

A rock hit Dr. King and knocked him down. He shook it off and continued to march, but my mother was shaken. She says she wasn't scared, exactly. She felt *implicated*: "It reminded me of what I'd seen on television when I was a young girl," she told me. "Of Little Rock. Of hatred, of vitriol. I was *seeing* what white supremacy looks like. For people who are not even getting anything out of it."

These white homeowners in Gage Park weren't rich. They were blue-collar working folks, like the neighbors my mother had grown up with. In fact, those racist counter-protestors sound uncomfortably like her own father, my grandpa Barney Dohrn—white working-class patriots nostalgic for a country that never existed, at least not for them, desperate to hang onto their small piece of privilege, and primed to see Black and brown people as enemies rather than potential allies.

I asked my mother about this—whether she saw her own family in those angry mobs. Was marching with Dr. King a rebellion against her father? Against his bigotry?

"OK, well . . ." She laughed this off. "That's just too psychological for me."

Again, this is typical of her; my mom doesn't like psychological explanations. And she thinks it's narcissistic and unseemly to reduce the larger movement for racial justice to a single person's choices, to turn a mass struggle into a personal psychodrama. Still, this seems to me like a key moment in her journey to radicalization. Something about seeing the hatred in those faces, *feeling* her own intimate connection to white supremacy, if only by association, made her decide to fight back against what she saw in those crowds.

That fall, she started volunteering for Dr. King's rent strike full-time. She was technically still enrolled in law school, but she barely went to classes anymore; most of her fellow students assumed she had gotten married and dropped out.

Later that semester, she had dinner with well-known left-wing attorneys William Kunstler and Charles Garry, who wanted to discuss her future. "Both of us were urging Bernardine to go into the law," Kunstler remembered in a later interview. "Our thought was that it would be better for the movement to have her as a lawyer. She rejected the idea vehemently. She said it was her function to be involved directly with the movement—that plenty of people could be lawyers. But she could serve a better purpose elsewhere."

"I've had some disagreements with her," he added later, "but if I had to make a list of the people for whom I have a deep and abiding respect, she'd be on it. More than most people, Bernardine wanted to be one hundred percent revolutionary."

My mother was already leaving the law behind. But King's protest wasn't the only experience that changed her that summer. Another chance meeting seems to have solidified her conviction that direct action, rather than legal study, was her best path forward.

One 102-degree day in July, Bernardine was at the church that served as headquarters for King's rent strike, working on a legal appeal, when somebody shouted, "There's an eviction two blocks away!" My mother and a few other legal advisors grabbed their armbands and ran outside, to find a group of sheriff's deputies carrying someone's belongings out of an apartment and dumping them onto the sidewalk.

"Nobody's shouting," my mother remembers. "Nobody's saying anything. But they're dumping the kitchen table, children's clothing, toys, dresser drawers—everything is piling up in the street."

Suddenly, she felt somebody next to her—a presence that felt unusually imposing. A man turned to her and asked, "Would you hold my suit coat?"

"And it's Muhammad Ali!" she says, laughing. "The most recognizable person—along with Dr. King—in the world at the time! How did he get there? I have no idea. How did he know to come? Who called him?"

Ali handed her a blue, silk-lined seersucker coat, stepped forward, and picked up a kitchen table. He turned without a word, walked into the apartment building, and started up the stairs. "Instantly," my mom remembers, "everybody, of the one hundred or two hundred of us standing around, picks up something and follows him inside."

The deputies just stood there watching while the crowd put the person's apartment back together, piece by piece. "And that was it!" she says. "It was a people power moment. It was a moment of defiance, a gesture by somebody who could carry it off with such panache and so little fear. And it just gave everybody a spark of what's possible.

"And it was that combination—seeing King, night after night, speaking in churches, out there on the West Side—and then these marches on the weekends . . . It was all so powerful and so brilliant. It changed my life."

* * *

That summer, Bernardine joined a new organization, Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS—the group that had mobilized the Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign and led the first mass protests against the

Vietnam War. She was already a bit older than most student activists—in 1967, she had graduated from law school, though she skipped the bar exam and was never licensed as an attorney—while most SDS members were still undergrads. She had some organizing experience and a legal background. This was an unusual combination, and SDS started sending Bernardine around the country to give speeches on college campuses—free advice for young men facing the draft on how they could legally refuse to fight in Vietnam.

"I have this vivid memory of going to Yale to speak," my mom told me. "It was the first time I walked onto a stage, and I was the only woman in a five-block area. Two or three hundred people in the audience. It was packed. And it wasn't comfortable at all. It was *voyeuristic*. Just my presence there . . . But it was also so *easy*. Everyone in the audience, *because* it was all men. They were facing the draft. They were panicked. And they were hanging on every word."

Until this moment, Bernardine had been known in the movement, if she was known at all, as an earnest, unassuming white volunteer, in a bit over her head, doing her best to help out behind the scenes. Which makes sense—she is by nature guarded, studious, and a bit shy. She's uncomfortable in the spotlight and hates being the focus of a crowd. But Bernardine was also young and impatient, eager to make a difference, and that impatience apparently won out over her timidity.

There's a perceptible shift in the way people start to talk about her around this time—as if she was an actor who overcame a stutter, or an NBA prospect who unexpectedly shot up six inches before senior year. Suddenly, when people describe my mother in 1967, it sounds as if they're talking about a rock star.

"First of all, there was her sex appeal," remembered one man who knew her in her SDS days. "She had the most amazing legs—every draft-resister on the East Coast knew those legs. But she was regarded as a good 'political person' at a time when other women in the movement weren't given any responsibility at all. Students really turned on to her. She did a good job."

"A stunningly attractive woman," remembered David Horowitz, her later right-wing antagonist. "Bisque skin, brown eyes, a full figure . . . [with a] strong-jawed sensuality and look of sultry defiance . . . Hitting New York

in the fall of 1967, with her tight miniskirt and knee-high Italian leather boots, she created an instant sensation among males in Movement circles."

Even FBI special agent Bill Dyson, the man put in charge of surveilling SDS that year, couldn't resist talking about her looks. "Would she win a beauty contest?" he told my podcast producer, Ariana Gharib Lee. "Probably not. But anybody who walked into a singles bar and saw her would say, 'Boy, that's a woman! I want to go talk to her!' I don't know whether she would be a Miss America. I never saw her in a bathing suit or anything like that. But she was just physically attractive. And I think when she got on the stage people would look up and say, 'Oh, boy, who's that?'"

My mother, needless to say, despises this type of description.

"It's a completely sexist point of view," she snapped at a reporter who asked about her "sex appeal" and its impact on her political organizing. "Nobody would talk in that backward way about men. I find it outrageous, really outrageous, and I think women in all walks of life, not just in public life, still receive that type of dual treatment."

Predictably, women in the movement seem to have been more able to see past Bernardine's appearance and to find other qualities worth celebrating. "She was a woman in an organization that was very male-dominated," remembered SDS member Cathy Wilkerson. "And Bernardine seemed to be able to rise above that. She was very articulate, and she was able to articulate a theoretical position very simply. She was down-to-earth. She listened to people."

"Bernardine was incredible," agreed fellow SDS member Kit Bakke. "She was in law school. She'd been around the block a couple times. And she was so serious and so articulate. It wasn't a game for her. Sometimes, with the guys, it was just so macho that you could hardly deal with it. But she was the only one who could stand up in a large crowd of people and get them to really understand the seriousness of what we were doing. I was her biggest fan."

Still, despite her best efforts and the support of other women in the movement, Bernardine's looks would continue to have this confining, contradictory quality throughout her life—attracting male attention while simultaneously allowing men to dismiss her as unworthy of notice; emphasizing her symbolic, aesthetic appeal while minimizing the substance of what she had to say. She found it frustrating. And infuriating. And still does.

But I think it's precisely this—her instinctive reaction of anger and defiance, rather than her legs or short skirts or "Italian boots" (which she says were actually from Goodwill)—that made people want to follow Bernardine around this time. She embodied a rage and defiance that spoke to the mood of the moment.

"Bernardine was the she-goddess!" recalled Ken Kelley, fellow activist and one of the co-founders of the White Panther Party. "She was the she-wolf of the revolution!" And Todd Gitlin, an SDS ally turned liberal critic of her later radicalism, wrote that at twenty-five, Bernardine "fused the two premium female images of the moment: sex queen and street fighter."

If my mom always hated the "sex queen" moniker—she would fight for the rest of her life to resist the way men in the media and the movement objectified her—she didn't mind being labeled a street fighter. Her fierceness and rage were ready to burst into the open.

* * *

On April 4, 1968, Bernardine was sitting alone in a cubicle at the National Lawyers Guild office in New York, working on a speech for her anti-draft campaign, when she heard screams coming from the street outside. Someone turned on a radio, and they all heard the news: the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—the most brilliant, inspiring, courageous civil rights leader of his generation, the man she had worked beside and marched behind and looked up to as a mentor and role model—had just been murdered by a white vigilante gunman at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.

Bernardine, along with half the country, reeled in shock, grief, and rage.

"I don't remember what anybody else around me did," she told me, "but I jumped up, put my purse over my shoulder, ran down the stairs, and jumped on a subway and got off at 42nd Street. I don't know why I did. I didn't know that everybody else would do the same thing. But by the time I got there, there were thousands and thousands of people in Times Square. I wanted to be in a crowd of people who were mourning. And *angry*. Both."

This was a dark time—a time when the hope and promise of the civil rights movement seemed to have been overly optimistic, even naïve. A bit like our own political moment, when each new headline seems to bring with it a new outrage, a new sense of injustice—an era when the bad guys often

seem to be winning. “Of course, you could see it coming,” she says now. “But still, the way it happened. It didn’t really matter *who* killed him—the CIA and all the conspiracy stuff around it. He knew he was gonna be killed. And he *was* killed. And it radicalized people.”

Indeed, the collective rage Bernardine felt in that moment would prove to be contagious; King’s death set off a series of violent uprisings in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Los Angeles. A few weeks later, on April 23, Columbia students took over several administrative buildings to protest the university’s involvement in weapons research and expansion into Harlem at the expense of local Black residents (shades of Bernie Sanders’s real estate activism back in Chicago), which kicked off a new, more militant era of student protests across the country. (Black students had occupied Howard University in March, but got only a fraction of the publicity.)

The whole nation seemed to be disintegrating, coming apart under the centrifugal forces of war and racism, like a jet engine cracking up and spinning out of control. And all you could do was either brace for impact or try to grab the controls.

Two months after King’s death, SDS held a meeting to elect new leadership. And even though she had been a member of the group for less than a year, Bernardine was put forward as a candidate—part of the Revolutionary Youth Movement slate, promising to take SDS in a more militant, radical direction. She remembers thinking at the time that the organization had become too passive, too much of a debate club, with “all male speakers and all male leaders. Ideological debates, *ad nauseam*. Very radical wordsmithing, but not something people wanted to be part of.”

“You have to take action,” she remembers telling herself. “You have to do something.”

On June 14, 1968, SDS met in plenary session to ask questions of the new candidates. Bernardine, the only woman on stage, faced vocal skepticism about her radical bona fides. “Do you consider yourself a socialist?” a man in the audience called out, drawing jeers and mocking laughter from the crowd.

Bernardine stared him down for a long moment of silence. “I consider myself,” she said finally, “a revolutionary Communist.”

She was elected in a landslide. Suddenly, at twenty-six, Bernardine was one of three co-equal national leaders of SDS, and one of the most prominent women in the New Left.

That same year, membership in the organization surged above 100,000, with 350 chapters nationwide. SDS was fast becoming the biggest, most visible, and most active student group in the country. And while some members still wanted to focus on building a big-tent mass movement, Bernardine and her Revolutionary Youth Movement comrades were determined to up the level of protest—to turn their peaceful student debate club into a militant fighting force.

"There's no way to be committed to nonviolence," Bernardine told a crowd of SDS members that month, "in the middle of the most violent society history has ever created!"

* * *

The FBI was watching all this with mounting concern. Four days after her election, the Bureau designated my mother a "Key Activist" who had been "most vocal" in "denouncing the U.S." and calling for "unlawful and disruptive acts." J. Edgar Hoover himself ordered his New York field agents to "immediately conduct an investigation regarding Dohrn. In the event adequate live informant coverage is not available, other types of coverage such as technical surveillance and physical surveillances should be considered . . . to establish the necessary coverage."

And now things start to move really fast.

Like most middle-class American college kids, my mother had spent her life up to this moment on a predictable moving pathway, doing more or less what was expected of her. She'd excelled in high school, finished her college degree (an unprecedented achievement in her family), and even fulfilled her father's lifelong dream of going to law school.

Like most teenagers, she'd had her small rebellions—rock music, French New Wave films, premarital sex—but she had never fundamentally disobeyed the rules. Never been in trouble before. Never broken a law.

Over the next year and a half, she would be arrested nearly a dozen times. She would brawl with riot cops on the streets in Chicago, split SDS in half to follow the leadership of the Black militant vanguard, travel to Havana to meet up with real-life global revolutionaries, and become the focus of simultaneous FBI, CIA, and congressional investigations. One of her closest friends would be murdered by Chicago police. Three more would die in an explosion at a secret bomb factory in New York.

And Bernardine herself would submerge into the underground, declare war on the United States, set off bombs across the country, and wind up on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list.

All that is just eighteen months away. But not yet.

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Part 2

Kill Your Parents

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that all true revolutionaries are motivated by great feelings of love.

—Ernesto “Che” Guevara, *Socialism and Man in Cuba*

Bill, in his work coveralls, and Bernardine, pregnant with me, 1977.

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Outlaw Country

(Off the Grid, 1980)

From my very earliest memories, I had a nagging feeling that my mom's fierce reserve and independence had something to do with my father. I knew this the way kids know things about their own families—wordlessly, and without conscious thought—because it's simply a natural law of the world into which they were born.

I remember once, on the road, Bill tried to take my mother's hand as he drove, and she shook him off without even looking at him. I remember the tightness in his profile afterward as he watched the highway, the thick, uncomfortable silence that filled our car like humidity. I remember wondering which of them was at fault: who had done something to hurt the other, and why.

Later, when I was ten, I had a nightmare that my parents were getting divorced. I woke up sweaty and scared, and when I climbed into their bed in the morning and told them about the dream, looking for reassurance, they glanced at each other, surprised. Bill deferred to my mother, as always, and she carefully explained that they would, in fact, be spending some time apart.

I didn't know at the time—I still can't be sure—whether I had somehow intuited their coming break or manifested my own childish nightmare simply by saying it out loud. But I always knew I was worried about my parents. I understood, without having to ask, that our family life was precarious, that if their relationship lost its gravitational pull, my brothers and I, small satellites orbiting around their twin planets, would spin out into the abyss.

So, as we drove through the underground in the late 1970s and early 1980s, through the California desert, down to Galveston, Texas, and across to Jacksonville, Florida, I kept a close eye on my dad from the back of the

car. And it was clear to me even then: Bill was being pursued by something more than the FBI.

He would sometimes drive all night, fueled by gas station coffee, speed, and adrenaline, avoiding bathroom breaks by peeing in empty Coke bottles, and the rest of us would wake hours later to find the sun lacing through the windows, and realize he'd covered five or six hundred miles while we slept.

He took pride in beating his own land speed records—Harlem to Chicago in just twelve hours, Des Moines to Reno in twenty-two—even though being pulled over for speeding at the time would have been catastrophic for our family. Bill was always driven and restless, eager to keep moving; he instinctively hated solitude and keeping still.

Bernardine was different. She'd make him stop whenever we passed a promising lookout point on the road—a redwood grove or stretch of cracked earth in the Mojave Desert—and take an hour just to stand there and absorb our surroundings. "Look where we are!" she'd whisper, a hush of awe in her voice. The rest of us, including Bill, would do our best to pay attention, to imitate her focus, not to complain about how hungry and tired we were, how we had to pee, had comic books we wanted to read, were desperate for a drive-through or an air-conditioned shopping mall, the fizz of soda, Raisinets, peanut M&Ms, and the chemical butter of movie popcorn.

Where Bernardine was quiet and brooding, Bill was fast-moving and open. While she was solitary and inward-focused, he was chatty and liked to talk to strangers. Of course, it's a cliché that opposites attract, but still, there was something in their relationship that never quite seemed to fit. I often wondered, back then and many times since, what could have brought these two unlikely people together.

That's not to say they didn't have a connection; their intimate, wordless outlaw bond was undeniable. They could anticipate each other's thoughts, and communicate silently with a gesture or warning glance in the mirror, a product of years together on the run. And they were also fiercely committed and loyal to one another; they'd been through a deadly conflict and emerged with the battle-tested camaraderie of a military unit or a criminal gang. But they still seemed more like accomplices than lovers, their partnership more like a shared project than a passion.

So as we drove across the country during those early years, I knew my father was trying to outrun something. And I also knew my mother was

wrestling with something else. I was just too young and inexperienced to put the two things together, and understand what it all meant.

* * *

Most days in the underground, my father would leave me and my brother with our mom before dawn, close to a beach or a campground or a playground to explore, while he went out to find work. The traditional gender roles in our family had been temporarily re-established by the inescapable physical reality of having a nursing baby at home.

My mom took us to the public library to read in the kids' section or made sandwiches in the back of our truck and walked us to the ocean, carrying little plastic pails and shovels so we could build castles and mermaids and play with other kids in the sand. On rare occasions when we had money to spare, Bill would check us into a roadside *Psycho*-style motel and we'd spend a day by the pool—my mom reading and getting a tan, my brother Malik covered with a towel and taking a nap, me splashing around in the deep end in my bright orange water wings.

Meanwhile, Bill worked to keep us all afloat. He took odd blue-collar jobs—at a metal plant, in shipyards, or in yard work or construction. "I went to work in a 'slave market,'" he told me. "You know, a day laborer outfit? And I got maybe a week or two weeks of day labor and it was the worst. Picking up garbage and killer ants and reptiles in the garbage and shit. And digging a trench at a poultry plant? It was just gross. And you realize what people do. And who does it? People who are really marginalized. Immigrants, undocumented people, alcoholics, and people who just need to get a fucking nickel."

We needed that nickel at the time. Badly. My parents were fugitives; they could only take jobs that didn't require background checks or Social Security numbers and paid off the books at the end of each day, in cash. So even though they were both college graduates, and my mother even had a law degree, we were usually broke; we crashed at campsites and on the couches of sympathetic friends, wore mostly thrifted clothes, and often wondered how we would pay for our next meal.

Bill never complained about it. I think he liked to feel useful, to be able to contribute in some tangible, physical way to our family's survival. His long hours and grueling work seemed to reinforce his own political self-

image, his sense of solidarity and self-sacrifice for a cause. The way he drove himself past exhaustion, pushing through worries and doubts, was also a quiet way to show my mom that they could keep going. That we were going to make it. That this wasn't the end.

When he got home in the afternoons, Bill was an attentive father, playful and silly. He always seemed to have plenty of energy left over for his kids—getting down on the motel carpet to wrestle, read us books, or take us out to the park to play so my mom could read or write letters or just be alone for a while with her thoughts.

Whatever demons were haunting him, whatever past chased our family across the country in those early years, Bill seemed to put aside when he was being a dad. In fact, part of the way I knew something was off between my parents was that the way they were with us—as if their kids were their main priority, the focal point of their entire existence—was not at all the way they seemed to act with each other.

But one of the things my parents didn't tell me—that was left out of our family story—was that my father, who seemed so open and talkative and transparent, had his own secrets. Like Barney Ohrnstein before him (and don't we all end up marrying a version of our parents?), there were ghosts in his past. So, to understand my parents' relationship—their unique bond, made up of equal parts criminal conspiracy, shared kids, and revolutionary love—means going back into the past again, to uncover the people they were before, and the ones they had loved and lost.

And there's something that feels uncomfortable—disloyal—about this kind of investigation. Even now, poring over my parents' private histories feels risky, and a bit dangerous. My own little rebellion—petty and insignificant, maybe, compared to theirs, but still primal and painful, still potentially destructive.

It reminds me of something my father once said about his own parents, at a meeting of young activists in Washington, DC, in 1969. Bill was just twenty-five years old at the time, a young campus radical burning with outrage about the hypocrisy of his culture, his upbringing, and even his own family.

"Kill all the rich people," he told a reporter that day. "Break up their cars and apartments!"

When a rival in the room reminded him his own parents were rich, Bill just smiled, glancing around at the other angry college kids in the room,

hyping themselves up for a riot.

"Bring the revolution home," he shrugged. "Kill your parents."

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Peak Everything

(Glen Ellyn, Illinois, 1944–62)

It seemed to him now that he was very near a fundamental understanding of himself, and he felt a sense of mystery and discovery as if he had found unseen gulfs and bridges in all the familiar drab terrain of his life. "You know," he said, "life is funny."

—Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*

The Ayers family. My father on the far left, in checkered blazer.

Unlike my mother, Bill really did grow up in a version of the American Dream. To this day, he remembers his suburban childhood as idyllic, like

something out of a Don Draper ad, brimming with fantasy and nostalgia.

"My memory of it is almost a stereotype of the 1950s," he told me. "It was peak everything. No insecurity. Green lawns, tall trees. My mom walked us to school every morning. She had a ponytail. I thought she was absolutely beautiful . . . I remember my dad coming home from work, and the two of them having a cigarette and a martini in the living room, every fucking night."

Bill's father, Tom Ayers, was the corporate executive who ran Chicago's Commonwealth Edison utility monopoly. Tom was a Republican, but nothing like the fire-breathing McCarthyite populists Barney voted for in Wisconsin. He was socially liberal—a pro-Civil Rights Act, Eisenhower Republican, who served on the Chicago Committee to Fight Discrimination and was one of the key negotiators between the city and Dr. King working to resolve the rent strike.

Today, Tom might have been part of the Mitt Romney wing of the GOP, unsettled by the raw nativism of the base; advocating for his own class interests, which he believed were also in the best interests of the nation; convinced that only he and his reasonable friends could keep the country on track.

But my grandpa Tom was never wealthy the way modern CEOs are wealthy—this was the postwar era, when even titans of industry were expected to model patriotic self-sacrifice for the greater good. Tom took pride in living modestly, driving his own Chevy and wearing American-made suits off the rack.

"One of his favorite stories," my dad told me, "was coming back from New York when he was chairman of ComEd, and he runs into the head of the union at the airport. And the guy said, 'Let's fly together.' But it turns out Tom's in coach, and the union guy is flying first class! Tom loved that kind of story. You know, it's probably only half true, but it's the kind of story he loved."

Still, by any standard, the Ayers family was well-off. My grandpa Tom and grandma Mary belonged to the local Glen Oak Country Club, played golf most weekends, and sent their sons to Lake Forest Academy, an elite preparatory boarding school on Chicago's North Shore—a *Dead Poets Society* kind of place, attended by other scions of the country's ruling class.

Unlike my mom, Bill was not an outstanding student, though he says he did read a lot—mostly Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer, the bad boy

novelists of the 1950s. But in his circle, connections and social currency were far more important than academics, and Bill was friendly and outgoing, like his dad, widely considered "the most likely to succeed" among the four Ayers boys (and one girl). He soon followed his father, mother, and brother Tim to the University of Michigan, where he wound up, almost by default, joining Tim's fraternity, Beta Theta Pi, known back then as the blueblood rich-kid party frat. He seemed poised to follow his father into the corporate world, or maybe politics—a son of privilege with a bright future, coming of age at the very peak of American peace and prosperity.

But if growing up in Glen Ellyn had mostly sheltered Bill from politics, landing in Ann Arbor in 1963 was like being caught outside in a lightning storm. Tom Hayden, the founder and intellectual wellspring of SDS, had graduated from Michigan just two years earlier, and the famous opening lines of his Port Huron Statement sound as if they could have been written with eighteen-year-old Bill specifically in mind:

> We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit. When we were kids, the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world . . . many of us began maturing in complacency. As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss.

In 1963, as Bill was moving into the dorms in Michigan, buses were already leaving for DC, carrying students to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Dr. King would deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech. Two weeks later, just as classes were starting in Ann Arbor, a bomb planted by a white supremacist exploded at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Alabama, killing four little Black girls in a Sunday school in the church basement.

Bill was, if not indifferent to this, at first blissfully unaware. He sometimes saw students distributing flyers outside his classes and passed little protests out on the quad. But in his small circle of Betas and football jocks, the civil rights struggle and the fight over school desegregation could feel very far away. He wasn't political—not yet—but like my mother, he was part of the culture swirling around him. And "political" questions at the time had a way of pushing their way into young people's personal lives.

That winter, Bill and his roommate, Jim Detwiler, kept seeing two pretty girls in skirts and cardigans passing by outside their dorm window. The girls were Black, which was unusual—Black students made up only 0.5 percent of Michigan's student body at the time—but the boys struck up a

conversation with them, flirty and curious, and it turned out the two girls weren't students at all but secretaries, commuting from Detroit to work at the campus radio station. Bill wound up dating one of them—Marie "Cookie" Woodford—for the rest of his freshman year.

His roommate Jim's starring spot on the Wolverines football team also meant that their little circle of friends also included an outsize percentage of the Black students on campus at the time, many of them on athletic scholarships; in its own fratty, macho way, it was an integrated social scene. So, even if he was barely conscious of it, by the end of his sophomore year Bill was starting to be aware of the civil rights movement. He says it was just "pressing in" at the time—that it was everywhere you looked.

He started showing up to protests.

This was pretty casual at first. Bill would see a group of people holding signs and just wander over and stand nearby. There was a pizza place in Ann Arbor that wouldn't seat Black people—"For you," the owner would bark, "takeout only." Bill joined the picket line outside. When a few of his fraternity brothers showed up late one night, drunk and hungry, and spotted a fellow Beta blocking the door, they asked him what the hell he was doing with all the hippies and tried to push their way through; Bill pushed back; they got in a shoving match and Bill's "brothers" knocked him to the ground.

He quit Beta Theta Pi the next day and moved out of the frat house for good.

So, like my mother—like many college kids during the summer of '64—Bill was searching for something more than what was expected of him, a larger purpose in his life, and the civil rights movement seemed like it might be that kind of calling. Bill said goodbye to his girlfriend and roommate, dropped out of college, boarded a bus, and headed south to join the fight.

* * *

He was too late. By the time he found his way to a Black church in Louisiana where he thought he might volunteer, the minister let Bill know, as politely as he could, that Freedom Summer was already over. The voting registration drive had ended with the November election, in which incumbent president Lyndon B. Johnson beat right-wing Republican Barry

Goldwater in a landslide. Support for desegregation and the Civil Rights Act seemed to be the majority position of the country; it appeared, for the moment, like the good guys had won.

Bill had missed Freedom Summer by just a few weeks. But he didn't have any fallback plan—he had already dropped out of college, and the new semester was already underway. And so, he says, on another whim, he decided to enlist in the Merchant Marine, a naval auxiliary that serves in peacetime as the backbone of the U.S. shipping industry. "In my own mind," he told me, "I was Norman Mailer going to war. I kept a journal. And I thought, 'I'm having experiences,' because I did feel culturally deprived. I felt like I had grown up in a cocoon."

Bill was set to work as an able-bodied seaman, chipping rust, swabbing the decks, and emptying latrines on a giant cargo ship headed across the North Atlantic, the massive vessel going near-vertical over hundred-foot waves—a harrowing voyage for a landlubbing new recruit. Finally, the ship reached the port of Piraeus near Athens, Greece, and the ordinary seamen fanned out across the city on shore leave: drinking, getting in fistfights, looking for girls—more Hemingway/Mailer cosplay, but still not quite the deeper purpose Bill had in mind.

So in the spring of 1965, he found himself sitting alone in an outdoor cafe in Athens's Constitution Square, hungover and at loose ends, worrying about his future, wondering what was next for him, when he saw a banner headline in the European edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* and learned that the first American combat troops had landed in Vietnam.

My father didn't know enough yet about history or geopolitics to understand what this meant—how a tiny Asian nation had become a proxy battleground in the global conflict between the U.S. and the USSR. He didn't know about colonialism or Ho Chi Minh or the long struggle for Vietnamese independence. He just knew his country was going to war. And he wanted to be part of it.

He even thought briefly about enlisting in the actual Marine Corps. Maybe being a soldier, fighting for his country, would give him the purpose he'd been looking for. Maybe, at least, it would give him something to write about. "I was thinking, well, if this thing is happening, maybe I'll be part of that," he told me, "because I didn't have any context for understanding what it really was. I was nineteen. I'm just thinking, what's next for me? What am I going to do?"

I find this moment fascinating—one of those branching paths in the road maps of our own identities, when we are forced to choose between different possibilities. How much randomness hides in those choices, which often seem inevitable in hindsight. How easily each of us might have become someone else.

Because Bill didn't enlist; the next day, he quit the Merchant Marine and caught the first flight back—from Athens to Rome, and then on to Detroit. He wasn't sure yet what he was going to do, but he knew he wanted to be closer to home, to see how his family and friends were responding to this new reality.

Bill arrived back in Ann Arbor in the fall of 1965, just in time to re-enroll for junior year. And to find that his whole world had irrevocably changed.

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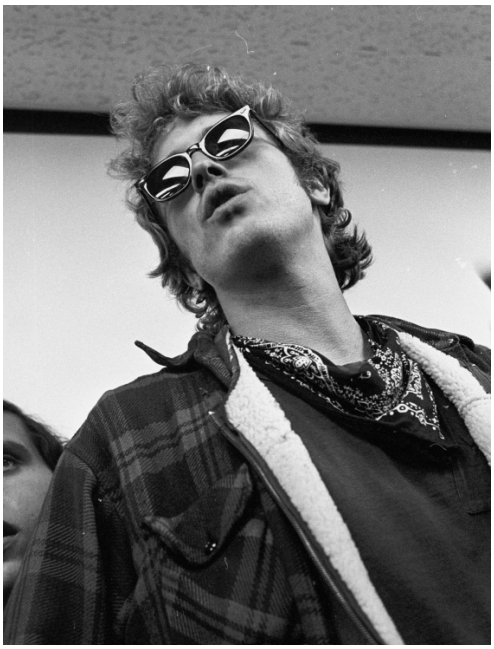
Freedom School

(Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1965–67)

The first revolution is when you change your mind.
—Gil Scott-Heron

Bill as a schoolteacher in Ann Arbor, MI.



Bill at an SDS protest, less than a year later.

A few weeks later, Bill found himself bruised and bloodied, lying on the floor of a Michigan jail cell, facing criminal charges for the first time in his life.

He hadn't even been gone a year, but by the time he returned to Ann Arbor, he barely recognized the place. There were protests everywhere—not just against the war, but against sexist dress codes, racial segregation in the dorms, CIA recruitment on campus, and classified military research funding. The school was on fire with politics—practically shut down since spring, when faculty had launched a campus-wide teaching strike to protest the beginning of the Vietnam War.

When the administration tried to break the strike, threatening to discipline faculty who canceled a class, the protestors switched tactics. Instead of canceling, professors brought their classes into the open, holding free public seminars on civil rights and the war in Vietnam—the very first "teach-ins." And it was there, out in the Michigan quad, that Bill first learned about Vietnam: its history, politics, and postcolonial legacy. He saw photographs, smuggled in from Canada, of villages destroyed by American bombs. He went to hear a speech by Paul Potter, the president of SDS at the time (three years before Bernardine was elected to SDS leadership), who

asked his audience a simple question: “How will you live your life so that it doesn’t make a mockery of your values?”

Bill joined SDS on the spot. This, finally, felt like the purpose he’d been searching for—not to fight in a war, but to fight to end all war. To oppose the violence being carried out by his country, in his name.

One of the retroactive myths of the Sixties—and how the decade has been packaged and passed down to us—is that most Americans, or at least most college kids, opposed the Vietnam War from the start; that student activism, fueled by youthful idealism and fear of the draft, was the dominant cultural position at the time. But being antiwar was deeply unpopular at first; protestors were widely despised, on campus and off, considered unpatriotic, disloyal, and deeply un-American.

In fact, the political freakout over student activism in the Sixties was even more intense than the backlash against campus protests today. Twenty states passed laws demanding “the immediate expulsion of students who violate university rules (in Louisiana, Ohio, South Carolina, and Wisconsin), firing faculty members (Louisiana, North Dakota), instituting criminal charges against those involved in sit-ins and takeovers (California, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas); in one instance, legislators even gave police a license to kill on campus without legal reprisal (West Virginia).”

On Michigan’s homecoming weekend, October 15, 1965, my father joined the first SDS sit-in at the Selective Service Office in Ann Arbor—the very first time Dr. King’s tactic of mass civil disobedience was deployed to protest the Vietnam War. “We were surrounded by students who wanted to see us killed or expelled,” Bill told me. “People were screaming, throwing trash, trying to drag protestors out of the building. The police came and they shut down the office and everybody left, except us. And they made an announcement: ‘If you stay, you’re trespassing. You’ll be arrested.’ Thirty-nine of us decided to stay. They carried us down the stairs, one at a time. And we got our heads banged and so on, because they were not happy.”

Bill had to call his parents from jail, to let them know he’d been arrested. Worse, he now faced potential expulsion and the loss of his student deferment; his draft status would be reclassified 1-A, making him eligible to be shipped off to Vietnam. He spent the next few days in jail thinking about what he’d done to his future, wondering if he’d made a terrible, life-

wrecking mistake. But it was there, in a holding cell, that Bill had a conversation that changed his life, once again.

The antiwar protestors had all been thrown together into one big "drunk tank," and there wasn't much to do but sit on the floor and chat. So, being a sociable Ayers kid, Bill struck up a conversation with an older man (this man was barely thirty, but my dad remembers him as old) whose wife, it turned out, was then working as a teacher at an experimental preschool in town. And for some reason, the guy's stories about the school struck a chord with Bill.

"I was a kid," he remembers. "I was looking for things. I was looking for adventure. I was looking for meaning. And he just made it sound like a really cool thing."

The moment he got released, without even going home for a shower or change of clothes, Bill went to visit the Children's Community School in Ann Arbor—a scruffy place, housed in two basement rooms in the Quaker community center downtown. The school was modeled after the "Freedom Schools" established in the South during Mississippi's Freedom Summer, to teach kids to be active citizens, follow their passions, and learn to fight for a better world.

Bill loved the place from the first day. It wasn't just its progressive politics, but the kids themselves—he sensed something of his own restless, anarchic spirit in these three- and four-year-olds. "What captivated me the most was their energy," he told me, "their enthusiasm, their open-mindedness. They weren't anybody's project to improve. One of the things I remember vividly is that I came out of that first morning with green paint all over my face and my glasses, and my glasses had green paint on them for the next year and a half or two years, until I got a new pair. So, I was kind of marked from the beginning."

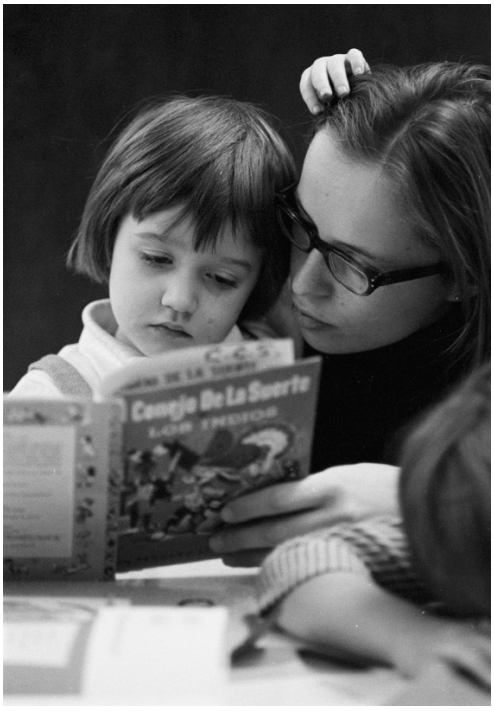
After showing up every day for a few months as a volunteer, Bill was hired full-time. Within a year, he was named the school's director, in charge of administration and fundraising. What he lacked in experience or credentials he apparently made up for in hard work and tireless enthusiasm. And if he had been searching for a calling, a deeper purpose in his life, he seems to have found it at the Ann Arbor Children's Community School; he would remain a teacher for the rest of his life.

But there was something else that drew him in that year, kept him coming back to the school, day after day. Bill was falling in love.

Diana Oughton was twenty-four years old, just a few years older than my dad, pursuing her master's degree at Michigan and volunteering as a preschool teacher while she tried to figure out what to do with her life—and she and Bill hit it off right away.

"Kids were drawn to her," he remembers. "Every picture I have in my memory is a picture of Diana sitting in a corner or against a wall with five kids piled on her. She was warm, she was kind, she was gentle. And she was beautiful."

Diana had a button made that year that said "Kids Are Only Newer People." She wore it to school and handed out copies to other teachers—which sounds exactly like the kind of thing my dad would do, the kind of button he would wear. In every story I've heard, Bill and Diana sound like kindred spirits, matching one another in idealism, dedication, and slightly goofy, child-centered earnestness. And even though they might not have seen it this way at the time, they must have sensed a comforting familiarity in their similar, privileged backgrounds.



Diana Oughton reads to a child at the Ann Arbor Community School, 1966.

Diana was from old money. Her great-grandfather William Boyce had founded the Boy Scouts of America. Her father, James Oughton, was an industrial farmer and cattle rancher, part owner of a bank, and a Republican

member of the state general assembly from Dwight, Illinois. Like Bill, Diana had gone to an elite prep school, where she learned to play the piano and flute and became an accomplished horsewoman.

But also, like Bill—like a lot of college kids in the 1960s—Diana was restless about her inheritance, searching for a purpose beyond what was expected of her. As soon as she graduated from Bryn Mawr, she signed up with the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker version of the Peace Corps, and was sent to teach adult literacy in the isolated Guatemalan market town of Chichicastenango.

Of course, lots of college kids choose to spend a year abroad—for community service or on a religious mission, or just to study and live outside their own cultural context—and most come home feeling enriched and ennobled by the experience. Diana was different. Helping the poor didn't make her feel virtuous or charitable. It enraged her.

Diana was overwhelmed by the poverty she saw in Guatemala—by the locals' tin-sheet houses, dirty drinking water, and lack of decent food. She felt disgusted by the American tourists she saw in the marketplace, bargaining for trinkets with local craftswomen whose children sat off to the side with swollen bellies, their hair bleached red by malnutrition.

Foreign service workers in Chichicastenango often escaped the heat and dust for meals at a Spanish restaurant called the Mayan Inn; at first, Diana joined them, eager to make new friends among her fellow volunteers, but she soon found herself embarrassed to be waited on by locals and appalled by the behavior of her fellow expats, like the shadow reflection of her own privilege.

Volunteers in Chichicastenango lived "modestly" on monthly allowances from their parents that would have supported a local family for years. Two guys from the Peace Corps had rented an entire apartment for a flea-bitten stray dog they'd adopted—a joke, but Diana didn't find it funny. She came to see it as a dark symbol of her fellow Americans' lack of empathy and humanity. She soon cut herself off from the other volunteers and spent her time hiking alone from village to village, giving lessons to locals who wanted to learn to read. She lived by herself in a tiny room with a dirt floor, whitewashed walls, and no electricity or running water. But soon, even this monkish self-denial, or self-punishment, started to feel small and insignificant next to the scale of deprivation she saw around her. What

use was it to teach a few peasants to read when their children were starving?

It radicalized her. By the time she arrived at the Ann Arbor Community School in 1966, Diana was both an experienced teacher and a budding revolutionary. And she and Bill quickly became inseparable—two wealthy college kids turned poor schoolteachers, bonded by shared anger and idealism, working long hours for minimum wage, in matching wire-rimmed glasses, work boots, and paint-spattered jeans.

After a few months of dating they moved in together, to a small attic apartment on McKinley Street. They had almost no money, but Diana considered it a point of pride not to ask their wealthy parents for help. "I don't want you to give me an allowance," she wrote to her father that year. "It's important to me to be on my own, to feel like I can support myself, to have responsibility for my own life. I feel like this, and I'm asking you to respect it. I think by age 25 I have the right to live the way I want, without feeling guilty that my way of life upsets you."

Still, Bill and Diana were apparently clinging to some fragment of their parents' traditional aspirations: an idyll of domestic happiness that would, of course, have to include a family. "We talked about having kids," Bill told me. "We were planning a life together. And part of that life together meant growing up together. We loved kids. And Diana loved the idea of having a kid. And we tried to have a kid for a few months. And then we gave it up as things intensified."

This was the first time I'd ever heard this—that my father had tried to have other children before me. And like most kids who learn something about their parents' early love affairs, the story of Bill and Diana gives me a strange, uncanny feeling of roads not taken, of other lives he might have led—and hypothetical children whose existence might have meant that Malik and I were never born.

* * *

But what does it mean, that Bill and Diana gave up their plans to build a family "as things intensified"? It means that by 1967, the war in Southeast Asia had become a slaughterhouse. Nearly 4,000 Vietnamese were being killed every week—many of them women and children—along with more than 200 American GIs. And because of the draft, this all hit very close to

home—nearly everyone Bill and Diana knew had a friend or close relative who had died in Vietnam.

Even closer to home: as soon as he graduated, finally limping to his degree in the spring of 1967, without a student deferment, Bill faced the very real possibility of being shipped off to Vietnam.

Opposing the war became their full-time job. By the end of the year, Bill and Diana were spending so much time on activism that they had no time left for teaching; Bill stopped paying attention to the Community School's fundraising, and the school shut down.

And this seems to me another key moment—a sudden and surprising turn in my father's story, even more surprising in its way than his attempt to have children with Diana. Because some of my earliest memories of my dad are of watching him on a carpet with a bunch of other toddlers crowded around him—sitting on his lap, hanging off his arms—reading books, singing songs. I remember him being happiest, most at ease, most *himself*, when he was teaching.

I even used to feel jealous, growing up, that my dad bonded so easily with my friends and classmates, that he seemed to love all children equally—not just me and my brothers, but apparently every kid he met. So, giving up teaching seems like an abandonment of his core self; more than being an activist or even a father, teaching brought out, and required, Bill's best qualities: empathy, improvisation, sociability, imagination. It was the job, and the vocation, that made him who he is. So why walk away from all that? After all, if he wanted to fight racism and inequality, to build a better future, teaching in a free, mostly Black, experimental preschool in Ann Arbor seems like a pretty good place to start.

But apparently, for Bill and Diana in 1967, teaching no longer felt like enough.

"We're well-known, we Americans, for loving our children," Bill told me when I asked him about this sudden shift in his priorities. "We love them so much. And we don't give a damn about anybody else's children. Vietnamese children? They were *also* children. And they also deserve to live. And our country was destroying them."

So, this is the big leap—from liberalism to radicalism. It can be as simple as a widening of one's circle of empathy. Because, of course, most of us would do anything to protect our families; we would fight and die to save our children. People throughout history have sacrificed themselves for

their small, local communities—to defend their villages or towns. In the modern world, soldiers and patriots extend this feeling all the way to the borders of their nation—they're willing to fight, and die, to protect their country.

But what if you make your circle wide enough that it includes not just you and your family, your fellow villagers, or your countrymen, but all people? If you truly believe human beings everywhere are just as important as those closest to you, then global injustice might start to feel unbearable. You may even become willing to sacrifice yourself—or your family—to help people on the other side of the world.

And if you spend your days taking care of kids—kids who are well-fed, safe, and protected—while at the same time you believe your government is murdering kids just like them? If you truly believe those kids are just as important, just as precious, as the children in your own classroom—or even the babies you and your girlfriend might be planning to have one day?

Maybe teaching feels like it's not enough. Maybe nothing feels like enough. And you decide you have to do something—anything—to fight back.

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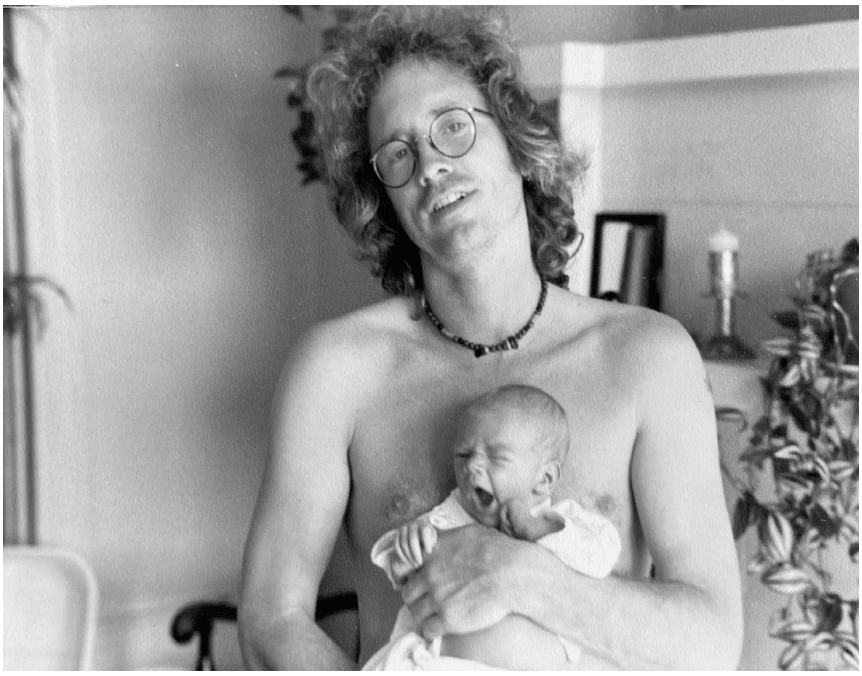
The Good Preschool Teacher

(Harlem, 1981)

Give me four years to teach the children, and the seed I have sown will never be uprooted . . .
Give me just one generation of youth, and I'll transform the whole world.

—V. I. Lenin



Father and son, underground.

Bill was responsible for many of my earliest, most fundamental radical life lessons. He was the person who taught me, when I was just three or four years old, how to recognize a plainclothes cop or undercover FBI agent on the street. We'd sit out on our stoop in Harlem together, or on the hood of a car, eating slices of greasy pizza and Italian ices in soggy, pleated white paper cups, while he pointed out to me the warning signs:

- **The shoes.** Even disguised in long hair and scruffy jeans, undercovers usually wear cheap leather loafers, well-shined.
- **The cars**. The government buys in bulk and won't spring for cosmetic extras. So, look for American-made cars—GMs or Chevys—with no chrome racing strips or fancy hubcaps or custom paint jobs, but a souped-up antenna and the telltale race-car rumble of an upgraded V8.
- **The men.** A Black guy and a white guy rolling by together, in Harlem? In 1981? Unless they're Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor, they're probably cops.

Bill taught me to spot highway patrol on the road at night, to look for the long-haul truckers in oncoming lanes flashing their brights to signal a checkpoint or a speed trap. He taught me never to use a landline that could be traced or bugged. We carried rolls of dimes in our pockets and made all our calls from payphones.

As we walked to school in the mornings—when I was finally able to go to school—Bill would balance my little brother on his shoulders while I held his free hand, taking two steps to every one of his, crack vials crunching under my Converse high tops. This was the early 1980s, the height of the crack epidemic, and the telltale bottles with their colorful plastic caps were everywhere. It was a teachable moment, and Bill took the opportunity to explain to me the poverty and desperation fueling the drug epidemic, and the racist history of the War on Drugs. And, going further back, the origins of our Harlem neighborhood—the long shadow of slavery and the history of the Great Migration, redlining and police violence, gentrification, and the toll of mass incarceration.

I was only half-listening. I was busy turning our walk into a game, seeking out the empty vials on the sidewalk, trying to stomp on as many as I could.

When we got to school, my lessons continued. Bill was not just my father, he was literally my teacher. While we were still underground, he had taken a day job, under the name Tony Lee, at a local alternative preschool in New York, so he could stay close to me and my brother while he was at work. So he taught us to cook, garden, and sing songs—Woody Guthrie, Phil Ochs, and old labor anthems—and he overhauled our school library to include books about race and class and gender: *Anansi the Spider*, *X: A*

Fabulous Child's Story, and multiple kids' anthologies about slavery and resistance and civil rights.

After school, when we shopped for groceries, Bill would point out the differences between the food at our local bodega and what was available a mile downtown at Zabar's. The produce in Harlem was often bad, the vegetables rotten, the meat full of fat. And still it was all more expensive than what you could get on the Upper West Side. Why? It doesn't cost more to truck a banana to Harlem than it does to Lincoln Center. Why should it cost more to get worse food in Harlem?

The guy at the cash register, overhearing parts of our conversation, maybe thinking the rhetorical questions were directed at him, just shrugged, unimpressed. "Costs what it costs, man. You want to buy it or not?"

In our family, pretty much anything could be an opportunity for a radical lesson. The comic books I read, the movies I watched, the toys I played with, were all charged with political significance. Bill pointed me toward *The Uncanny X-Men* (I could relate to hunted misfits, hiding underground) and *The Black Panther* (I naturally assumed T'Challa was connected in some vague way—how could he not be?—to our friends in the Black Panther Party). When I begged for a G.I. Joe action figure for my birthday, he tried to explain to me that G.I. Joe was a recruitment tool for the U.S. military, a symbol of American imperialism and macho gun violence—the embodiment of everything our family was fighting against. I didn't care. We'd never owned a television, but I'd caught glimpses of the commercials on small black and white TVs in laundromats and roadside motels: *He'll fight for freedom wherever there's trouble, G.I. Joe is there!* This sounded to me like the other freedom fighters I'd been taught to love. And I loved G.I. Joe. I *needed* one.

I wore my parents down. For my seventh birthday, they got me two G.I. Joes: Lonzo Wilkinson, code name STALKER, and Charlie Iron-Knife, code name SPIRIT (who came with an awesome detachable American eagle mounted on his back). These were the only Black and Indigenous action figures in the Hasbro collection at the time, and Bill helped me create our own backstories: Lonzo was not just a G.I. but a veteran turned urban guerrilla soldier, like our friends in the Black underground; Spirit was not just a U.S. Army tracker but a Native resistance warrior, like Osceola and Cochise, the Indian chiefs my brother and I were named for.

This was more than an exercise in liberal DEI. My father's educational project went much deeper than that, well beyond the progressive idea of "diverse" children's toys. It wasn't enough for me to have a Black soldier fighting *alongside* the (always male, always white) protagonist. My Black and Indigenous soldiers had to *replace* the default G.I. Joe (Robert Graves, code name GRUNT), to exist separate and apart from the dominant cultural perspective and so become the central lens through which I saw the world, like a fifth column inside the U.S. Army itself—or, at least, inside the plastic milk crate and backpack where I kept my toys.

In fact, I now understand, Malik's and my early childhood education (or indoctrination) was the culmination of more than a decade of Bill's own reeducation: the end result of a long process of trying to rethink what it meant to grow up white and male in America, to reevaluate who he was and who he wanted to be, to reimagine what he wanted to pass on to his kids.

Because when the Ann Arbor school shut down, Bill and Diana didn't actually quit being teachers. They simply shifted their focus—from their preschool kids to themselves. They were now firmly convinced that their parents' worldview—centered on hard work, prosperity, patriotism, and family—had failed them. They had lost faith in their own childhood lessons. They were determined to break from their youthful indoctrination in American capitalism, and male and white supremacy.

To do that, they decided, required new models. A new curriculum. Hands-on lessons in how to root out the deep-seated biases and cultural assumptions they had inherited, or been taught, or simply imbibed with their mothers' milk. They had to rid themselves of their middle-class softness; to become tougher, more militant and more hardcore. To learn to fight with police. Build safehouses. Make fake IDs. Build bombs.

They would have to teach themselves to be revolutionaries.

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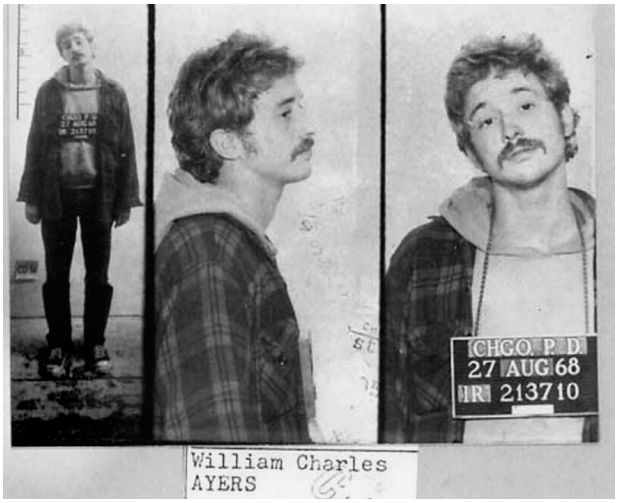
The Jesse James Gang

(Detroit, 1967–68)

BUTCH: You know, when I was a kid, I always thought I'd grow up to be a hero.
SUNDANCE: Well, it's too late now . . .

—Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid



Bill after being arrested protesting the Democratic National Convention, August 27, 1968.

By the end of 1967, Bill and Diana had found a third member to join their little Midwest SDS crew: a fellow teacher-turned-activist and Bill's new best friend, Terry Robbins. Depending on who you ask, Terry sounds like he was wild and fun, or unpredictable and dangerous. He was the type of friend who says crazy things and takes big risks, who's too provocative and over-the-top to take seriously—until he forces you to take him seriously.

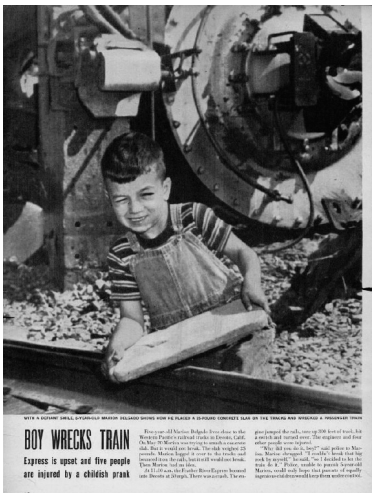
"Terry had an intensity that was just shattered glass," Bill told me. "If it hadn't been for the movement, he'd have climbed up on a tower and shot people. I mean, he was very intense! The way he looked at you. The way he smoked a cigarette!"

Terry grew up in Queens, the son of a poor Jewish garment worker and a housewife who doted on her only child. But his mother died of breast cancer when Terry was only nine, his father remarried, and Terry's new stepmom didn't like him; his adolescence was marked by indifference, neglect, and physical abuse. By the time he went off to college, Terry had grown up short and sensitive, talkative and hyper-intellectual—and full of rage.

"He felt like he had to prove himself," recalled his later girlfriend Cathy Wilkerson, "and the thing that he was best at was being furious. He was furious about the war and furious about racism and was deeply wounded by the inhumanity of it all. And he was going to express that fury one way or another."

Terry carried around a clipping from an old 1947 *Life* magazine he liked to show people—a human interest story about a kindergartener in California who had put a slab of concrete on some train tracks—as a schoolboy prank—and knocked a Western Pacific engine off its rails. The crash damaged the train and injured five people. But in the photograph *Life* ran, it doesn't look like a tragedy or even a regrettable accident. This five-year-old kid, Marion Delgado, hunches over the railroad track holding up a rock, half-winking and grinning into the camera—as if he's proud of himself. All summed up with the irresistible headline: BOY WRECKS TRAIN.

Terry loved it. For him, this kid became a kind of lunatic mascot, an icon of anarchist mayhem. "Marion Delgado," Terry would laugh, "live like him!" And this became a slogan and a secret code for my parents and their friends, part of the Weather Underground's founding myth. When we were fugitives, you could call someone on the phone and just say, "This is Marion Delgado," and the person on the other end would know, right away, you were part of the group.



BOY WRECKS TRAIN

Express is upset and five people are injured by a childish prank

Life *magazine "Boy Wrecks Train" article, 1947.*

But that all comes later. What "Marion Delgado" meant to Terry and Bill and Diana in 1968 was simple: you didn't need a big national organization or a mass movement to change the world. One kid with a well-placed slab of concrete had derailed a train—so a small group of committed wreckers might take down an entire system.

* * *

Bill and Terry set out to write an article together about teaching. It was slated for publication in a book called *Beyond Dissent: Papers from the New Left*, and even had a title: "Turn Towards Children." I tried to track it down; I was interested in reading what Bill and Terry had to say about kids in those days after the Ann Arbor school collapsed—how they squared their long-term love of teaching with their emerging militant radicalism. But Bill told me he couldn't remember the article and, after months of searching, I couldn't find anything more than its title.

Which makes sense—because as it turns out, the article never existed. Earlier that year, a group of left-wing activists had set out to collect a volume of essays about their emerging idealogical movement, but in a telling sign, half the authors never wrote their articles, and the book never saw print. Which is even more revealing, in its way, than anything Bill and Terry might have put down on paper. They were already leaving their intellectual pursuits far behind.

Terry had dropped out of Kenyon College in 1966. Bill limped through his classes and graduated from Michigan without distinction in 1968. By then they were both full-time organizers, emerging leaders of the Michigan–Ohio branch of SDS, and their Detroit-based crew—Motor City SDS—quickly made a name for itself as one of the most strident, aggressive, militant chapters in the entire national organization.

Bill and Terry now spent their days driving around to college campuses across the Midwest, handing out flyers, disrupting classes, and burning exam papers on the quad—doing anything they could to convince other disaffected kids to join the movement. "We're saying to people that youth is the revolution!" they wrote in a shared byline for SDS's paper *New Left Notes* (in an article they actually *did* finish). "That politics is about life, struggle, survival . . . We're saying that there ain't no place to be today but in the Movement . . . And we're saying to kids all over the place that if you're tired of the Vietnamese eating napalm for breakfast, if you're tired of the blacks eating tear gas for dinner, and if YOU'RE tired of eating plastic for lunch, then give it a name: Call it SDS, and join us!"

Bill and Terry were always hyping each other up to do more, risk more, one-upping each other with their aggressive rhetoric and tough-guy cultural touchstones. Their favorite song was the Doors' "Break On Through (To The Other Side)." Their favorite films were violent neo-westerns about counterculture outlaws fighting the cops and going out in a blaze of glory: *The Wild Bunch*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. They even started calling their little SDS group the Jesse James Gang.

Amid all this macho posturing, Diana was often the lone voice of reason. Despite her radical politics, she was by all accounts a pacifist and a gentle person, in both meanings of the word: the kindness of her temperament, and the gentility of her manners. At least at first.

"When I first met them, they were very kind people," remembers Eric Mann, a longtime friend from their Ann Arbor days. "Very funny and open. And they did get hardened."

It wasn't just Bill and Diana. By 1968, pretty much everyone in SDS was being radicalized by the ongoing war in Vietnam and the government assault on civil rights leaders at home. Student activists in general were more and more angry, willing to cross both legal and ethical lines to stop what they saw as a genocide being carried out by their country, in their names.

"I feel like a moral person," Diana wrote home to her parents that year, "that my life is my values, that most people my age or even younger have already begun to sell out to materialism, status, hypocrisy . . . I'm not surprised you don't understand. I feel like part of a vanguard."

Together, Bill and Diana and Terry decided they had to up the level of protest. They had now moved not just past teaching, but past political organizing itself; they were determined—ironically, for a group of peace activists—to transform themselves into soldiers.

"What we were doing was trying to learn how to fight so that we could fight white supremacy," Bill told me. "And not just this or that individual racist, but a whole system. We knew we had to be a lot tougher than we were . . . So, we began to do things like learn how to shoot pistols and learn how to make smoke bombs and how to make dynamite bombs."

While Motor City SDS—the Jesse James Gang—had previously represented a kind of lunatic fringe within the larger organization, by late 1968, following the Tet Offensive and the murder of Martin Luther King, the whole peace movement lurched in their more angry, militant direction.

Tom Hayden, SDS's founder and most well-known intellectual voice, still sounded relatively moderate in public, but in private even he was now preaching violent escalation. "I thought Tom was one of the smartest guys ever," Bill told me. "He would come to Ann Arbor and give a speech and there'd be a thousand people there. And then we'd go have coffee, and we'd have a *real* meeting. And the real meeting was Tom saying, 'Here are some tactics we're talking about: bring slingshots, bring marbles. Their horses won't be able to walk in the street. We're gonna fuck them up!'"

"Them," in this case, meant the police at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

SDS was planning a giant protest against Democratic presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey, widely despised in the antiwar left for his prowar stance and for defeating peace candidate Eugene McCarthy in the primary. (Another candidate, Robert Kennedy, had been assassinated in June.) The supposedly liberal Democratic Party had apparently doubled down on President Johnson's support for American imperialism and endless war, and one of Humphrey's redeeming qualities—his support of the Civil Rights Act—further split the Democratic coalition when segregationist George Wallace left the party to run on the American Independent ticket.

The Democrats were in disarray, allowing Republican Richard Nixon to have it both ways—vowing to crack down on (presumably Black) urban rioters as a "law and order" president, while also claiming to be the peace candidate whose election would somehow bring an end to the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War. The parallels to our own time are striking, but the 1968 election was, even by our contemporary standards, insane.

As Bill and Diana and Terry and the other SDS members started to gather downtown for the protest, heavily armed cops in riot gear were deployed on the streets nearby. During the riots following Martin Luther King's death in April, mayor Richard Daley had famously directed his police force "to shoot to kill any arsonist or anyone with a Molotov cocktail in their hand in Chicago." By the time the Democratic Convention rolled around a few months later, the cops didn't need the encouragement—the mostly white, blue-collar Chicago police were enraged as they watched a bunch of long-haired middle-class college kids take over their streets—and the confrontation outside the International Amphitheater quickly devolved into a police riot. As *Life* magazine (the epitome of "mainstream media" at the time) put it, "a significant number of Chicago Police units, faced with a situation calling for great discipline and restraint, simply dissolved into violent gangs and attacked protestors, press and bystanders indiscriminately."

"The McCarthy kids—the 'Clean for Gene' kids—were getting the shit kicked out of them!" my father remembers. "I mean, it was bizarre. It had all these combustible elements. The whole world was watching. And it was a shit show."

On the second day of the convention, Bill and Terry and Diana were protesting in Grant Park when a line of cops charged the crowd, waving guns and beating people with billy clubs. "I took off," Bill says. "Everybody took off. And suddenly I find myself on the Illinois Central Bridge. They were gaining on me, and I thought, 'I'm gonna get killed! They're gonna catch me on the bridge and just throw me on the tracks!' So I turned and swerved, and they caught me and dragged me back and beat me up. They broke my glasses and cut my head. And I couldn't have been prouder."

Bill was arrested for the second time in his life and spent another night in a holding cell. But if Mayor Daley thought breaking hippie heads and making mass arrests would keep order in Chicago, his victory was short-

lived. The Chicago police riot further radicalized SDS—transforming the organization from a mostly peaceful antiwar protest group into an army of angry militants. The cops had bought themselves a little over a year before the streets of downtown would erupt in political violence once again.

As SDS founder Tom Hayden put it, "Many Weatherman leaders were shaped by the events of Chicago '68. When our legal protest was clubbed down, they became outlaws. When our pitiful attempts at peaceful confrontation were overwhelmed, they adopted the tactic of offensive guerrilla violence. When our protest against the war failed, they decided to bring the war home."

* * *

This is the moment when my parents' separate origin stories finally converge, when I can start to see the outline of my future family take shape. When you write your own family history, it can be tempting to structure the narrative so that it all leads up to you—as if the lives your parents led before your birth were just preparation and prologue, your own existence the beginning of the first chapter. But my birth was just one link in a long, tangled chain of events that preceded and followed me, and nothing about it was predestined or inevitable.

My mother had missed the protests at the '68 DNC. My parents were still on different trajectories. While Bill was in Chicago getting himself arrested, Bernardine was far away, in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, attending an international antiwar conference as a member of SDS leadership. My parents had met a few times that year—they knew each other by reputation as like-minded activists and ran into each other at meetings and protests, but their acquaintance was casual, their connection not personal, but public and political.

But Bill remembers seeing Bernardine give a speech for the first time, when she was already a famous, if enigmatic, national figure in the group. "She was a burning, electrifying, charismatic person from the first moment I saw her," he told me. "She commanded her audience. She commanded attention. She was beautiful. And she was wicked smart and opinionated. I don't know if you know this about her, but she has strong opinions." (This is a running joke in our family: the extreme understatement of my mother's "strong opinions.")

But Bill and Diana were still a couple. Whatever impression Bernardine made on Bill as a public speaker, my parents weren't romantically involved. In fact, to fall in love, the two of them would eventually have to be thrown together almost at random, to go on the run in the aftermath of devastating violence and tragedy. Before they could become a couple—before they could become parents—people they both loved would have to die.

So, I need to remind myself that their meeting wasn't fate but contingency, that it would be many years before their connection was firmly established, before they became partners and considered having children.

In fact, the next time Bill and Bernardine saw each other would be in 1969, at the SDS national convention in Chicago, where student activists radicalized by a year of assassinations, massacres, and police riots would gather en masse to fight out a new way forward, and where my mother would make a shocking choice that would chart a new course for their lives—and mine.

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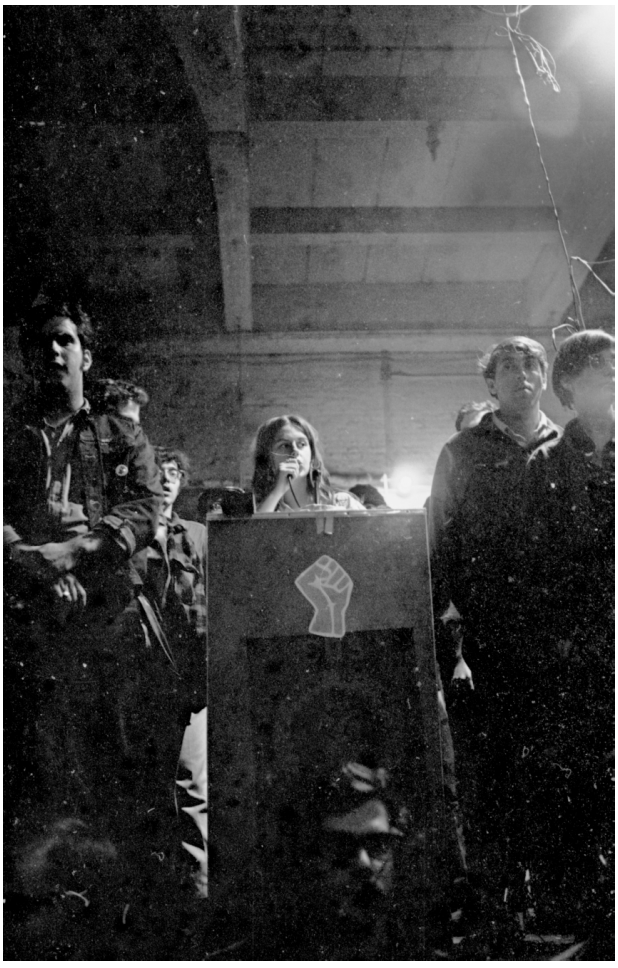
Action Faction

(Chicago, 1969)

These men are all talk; What is needed is action — action!
—John Brown, remarks at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention, 1859



Bernardine at the podium, flanked by members of the Action Faction, at the SDS National Convention in Chicago, 1969.

In the summer of 1969, student hitchhikers streamed into Chicago from across the country—from Texas, Colorado, Florida, and Maine. Bill, Diana, and Terry arrived by bus from Detroit. Bernardine was already on the ground in Chicago with the rest of SDS leadership, ready to run the show.

The Chicago Coliseum—the site of their planned convention—was an enormous echoing cement cavern that sometimes doubled as a roller derby rink, an appropriate venue for what was shaping up to be a spectacle of performative combat. The place was quickly filled with a circus of counterculture college kids—more than a thousand SDS delegates, milling around, catching up, smoking weed, and getting in fights. Tape recorders and members of the "capitalist press" were barred from the premises. Delegates were screened and patted down as they entered, and hundreds of knives, blackjacks, and slingshots were confiscated at the door.

On the second day of the convention, Bernardine was on stage speaking to the crowd, trying to keep order amid the chaos, when the doors at the back of the auditorium slammed open and a line of Black Panthers marched into the room, in their signature black leather jackets, berets, and wrap-around shades, and flanked the stage with arms crossed over their chests. It was a dramatic show of force—a display of revolutionary style and military discipline that quieted the crowd.

But what were the Black Panthers doing at an SDS meeting? Bernardine had invited them.

To understand why, and what the Panthers' appearance meant for the future of SDS, and my family, it helps to go back just a few months, to see the initial fissures in an emerging split that threatened to tear the antiwar movement apart that year. The details of the dispute are complicated, but the central conflict is essential—and simple: whether young activists should focus their attention more on class or on race.

On one side was Progressive Labor (PL), the largest faction within SDS at the time. PL was made up of Marxist intellectuals who believed the revolution would inevitably come from the working class, so student activists should commit themselves to becoming blue-collar workers—taking jobs in factories and hotels and union shops, where they could help organize and build a broader class consciousness. PL was ideologically disciplined and culturally conservative; members tended to avoid drugs, long hair, cursing, and public promiscuity, all of which they felt might

isolate them from their natural proletariat allies. Bernardine once called them "cultural aliens."

On the other side of the split was Bernardine and her group, the Revolutionary Youth Movement, known within SDS as the Action Faction. The Action Faction, in contrast to the economic Marxists of PL, wanted to focus less on class and more on race. They wanted to build a small, radical resistance movement in America, modeled on non-white anti-colonial guerrilla fighters overseas: the Viet Cong, the Tupamaros in Uruguay, the National Liberation Action in Brazil. Or, closer to home, the rebels of the enslaved colony within the United States, the true vanguard of the coming revolution—the Black Panther Party.

Bernardine was the face of the Faction. Bill, Diana, and Terry were all members. But its loudest, most strident voice was Bernardine's on-again-off-again boyfriend, John "J.J." Jacobs—one of the instigators of the Columbia University rebellion a year earlier.

J.J. "had brains, vision, and the ability to talk," remembered his friend and fellow Columbia organizer Mark Rudd. "When he was on, he was brilliant. Nobody else even came close. He quoted Che's dictum: what the Movement needed to succeed was 'audacity, audacity, and more audacity!'" Another friend, David Horowitz, described J.J. as "tall and rangy, with hooded good looks and an intentionally menacing manner, [he] showed up for meetings of the Action Faction sporting a leather jacket and Levi's, his shirt collar open to show a lion's tooth on a gold chain, and his hair slicked back into a ducktail. His style was street-corner stud, intended to clash with that of the earnest student radical." J.J. and Bernardine had arrived at the convention as a couple, and they were determined to pull SDS in a more militant direction.

"White youth must choose sides now," Bernardine told SDS members that year. "We must either fight on the side of the oppressed or be on the side of the oppressor!"

This wasn't just rhetoric; one of Bernardine's first actions as newly minted leader of SDS had been to reach out to the Black Panther Party in Chicago, to build an alliance with the Illinois Panthers' charismatic young leader, Fred Hampton. Fred was only twenty-one years old at the time, but he was already a rising star in the Party—militant, provocative, and brilliant—and he and Bernardine quickly became political partners. They held joint meetings and protests; the Panthers used SDS's printing press to make their

posters and leaflets; and the groups exchanged intel about government surveillance and police informants. In 1968, Bernardine (and SDS) officially joined Fred's Rainbow Coalition of activist groups, and they became allies—though both Bernardine and Fred preferred the more active, militant-sounding term "comrades."

"Some people don't understand the Black Panther Party's relationship with white mother country radicals," Fred told his group in a speech that year. "But what we are saying is we will work with anybody, and form a coalition with anybody, who has revolution on their minds."

My mom, for her part, was clear-eyed about the role she envisioned for herself, and for SDS. "The best thing that we can be doing for ourselves, as well as for the Panthers and the revolutionary black liberation struggle," she told her members, "is to build a fucking white revolutionary movement!"

The FBI was uncomfortably aware of what was happening here. J. Edgar Hoover had long worried about the potential for interracial solidarity between radical anti-government groups, and he was determined to disrupt this cross-racial "embryonic alliance," as he called it. "The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the BPP are cooperating in several ways to exploit their common revolutionary aims," he wrote to his agents in May 1969. "Together these organizations pose a formidable threat . . . It would be a definite advantage if these two groups were alienated." To accomplish this, Hoover ordered agents to "plant the idea that the SDS is exploiting the BPP [and] using the BPP for their dirty work . . . [that] SDS will relegate the BPP to the status of servants." In a separate memo, he wrote, "It may also be possible, through anonymous mailings and other actions, to create an ideological storm within SDS . . . neutralizing or destroying SDS as an effective movement."

The Bureau had deployed these tactics before, most infamously against Martin Luther King Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference, using rumors, innuendo, and agents provocateurs to sow division within and between civil rights groups. Now they turned those tactics on SDS and its young female leader. FBI agents spread lurid sexual rumors about Bernardine's "relationships" with the Black Panthers, even creating a fake satirical newspaper, "New Laugh Notes," featuring "cartoons designed to defame the twenty-five-year-old . . . Portraying Dohrn holding a bag of cash in one instance, and sunbathing in a bikini on a Malibu beach in another, the

FBI's sexist graphics sought to depict the charismatic female SDS leader as someone squandering the organization's funds for personal benefit."

As the FBI hoped, J.J. and the Action Faction blamed these insults on their SDS rivals in Progressive Labor. PL helped the split along, denouncing Bernardine and her proto-alliance with Fred Hampton, calling the Black Panther Party "bourgeois" and "reactionary" and even arguing that Black nationalism was itself counter-revolutionary, since it emphasized race over the all-important class struggle. Incensed, the Black Panthers upped the ante. "If the Progressive Labor Party continues its egocentric policies and revisionist behavior," the Panthers wrote in an official statement read out on the convention floor, "they will be considered as counter-revolutionary traitors and will be dealt with as such."

The FBI's years-long strategy was beginning to show results, spurred on by the Bureau's dirty tricks and SDS's own toxic internal dynamics. Hoover's "ideological storm" was on its way, and by the time the phalanx of Panthers marched into the Chicago Coliseum on the second day of the SDS convention, everyone was spoiling for a fight.

Rufus "Chaka" Walls, Fred Hampton's minister of information, took the microphone first. His voice dripped with contempt for the "armchair Marxists" of Progressive Labor as he scoffed at PL's claim to be a "revolutionary vanguard," reminding the crowd that the Black Panther Party, the true vanguard of the revolution, had been "shedding blood" for years, while those white campus radicals "haven't even shot rubber bands." The Action Faction laughed and jeered, and PL was on the ropes: it was impossible for PL to justify its revolutionary bona fides in front of a group of hostile Panthers.

But then, for some reason, Walls shifted gears and started mansplaining to the convention about the role of women in the movement. "We believe in the freedom of love," he said. "In pussy power." This got a few laughs, but a lot more boos.

"Oh, we've got some puritans in the crowd?" Walls chuckled. And then, apparently just to twist the knife, "Superman was a punk—because he never even tried to fuck Lois Lane!"

More boos, and another Panther, Jewel Cook, went to the podium, seeming at first like he wanted to calm things down. "You sisters *do* have a strategic position in the movement," he assured the women in the hall. "*Prone*."

The crowd exploded.

PL started chanting: “Fight male chauvinism! Fight male chauvinism!”

The Action Faction chanted back: “Fight racism! Fight racism!”

Behind the Panthers at the podium, Bernardine now faced a choice. As the only female national leader of SDS and the only woman on the stage, she had a perhaps unique credibility when it came to gender issues. If she had decided in that moment to denounce the Panthers, she might have united the various factions of SDS against this sexist provocation from a group of outsiders. But that would have also meant turning an almost entirely white crowd against the Black vanguard—after personally inviting the Panthers to speak and working all year to help build Fred’s cross-racial revolutionary alliance. So, it came down to gender solidarity vs. racial solidarity—standing with her fellow females of SDS or her new allies in the Rainbow Coalition.

Or maybe the choice wasn’t that clean at all—since more than half of Black Panther Party members at the time were women. As Angela Davis told me, even back then, “Bernardine knew exactly how to make those connections long before the term ‘intersectionality’ had ever been introduced.”

Here’s how my mother described her decision to me: “Whenever white people have a choice, you can’t make that choice without thinking about how easy it is to *not* stand up for Black people at a given moment. I never felt like I wasn’t choosing women, but I felt the essential American dilemma is white people standing up, not once, but consistently over time, against the apparatus of Black slavery.”

So, Bernardine made her choice. She wrenched her arm away from a male activist trying to hold her back and grabbed the microphone. “We are going to have to decide!” she shouted to the amped-up crowd, “whether we can continue to stay in the same organization with people who deny the right of self-determination to the oppressed! Counter-revolutionaries who want us to deny our decade-old allegiance to the Blacks, the Vietnamese, the guerrillas, the youth of America. Anyone who wants to talk about that, follow me!”

With that, Bernardine jumped down off the stage, in her thrifted bell-bottoms and faded man’s shirt, and stormed out of the Coliseum.

“The place went nuts,” remembers fellow Action Faction member Jeff Jones. “It was mainly yelling, and booing and applauding, and for a lot of

us it was a challenge. It was a very challenging moment. What were we going to do? Were we going to follow her lead?"

Many did. Hundreds of people—including Jeff, J.J., Bill, Terry, Diana, and the entire Action Faction—followed Bernardine out of the convention hall that day. Her walkout had split SDS in half.

Outside, the Faction held a quick vote—five to one in favor of expelling Progressive Labor from their organization. Bernardine was now firmly in charge, ready to take SDS in a new, more militant direction.

The FBI quickly took notice of the change. "Anyone active in SDS now cannot help but be aware of SDS objectives to destroy our form of Government by any means," wrote the Bureau's assistant director W. C. Sullivan to his agents in the field. "All members of SDS should now be investigated."

The FBI couldn't have known it yet, but by the time Sullivan wrote his memo, SDS as he knew it no longer existed. The organization that had defined the peaceful antiwar protests of the Sixties—the largest student activist group in the country—was history. In its place was a new organization—what had once been called the Action Faction, much smaller and more hardcore, fiercely committed to following the leadership of the Black vanguard, to fighting the police, and to going out, if necessary, in a blaze of revolutionary glory.

They called themselves Weatherman, after the lyrics of Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues": "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." It was a way of saying the revolution is coming, like it or not. The winds of change are blowing. And we don't even have to tell you about it—you don't need a weatherman—because we're going to *make it happen.*

Decades later, many SDS members are still furious about this split. Mark Rudd, Bernardine's fellow National Secretary and a founding member of the Action Faction, called the fracturing of SDS "the single greatest mistake I've made in my life. It was a historical crime . . . My friends and I chose to scuttle America's largest radical organization—with chapters on hundreds of campuses, a powerful national identity, and enormous growth potential—for a fantasy of revolutionary urban guerrilla warfare."

But for Bernardine, there was a logical necessity to the choice. Years of organizing and peaceful protest had failed to stop the war, the assassinations of Black leaders, or police violence against the civil rights movement. If

anything, the American carnage was accelerating: Black protestors beaten bloody on the Pettus Bridge in Selma; Martin Luther King Jr. murdered in Tennessee; peaceful student demonstrations met with tear gas and billy clubs in Chicago; children napalmed and bombed in Vietnam.

As the Sixties came to a close, war and white authoritarian violence were seemingly everywhere you looked. So, by the late summer of 1969, Bernardine no longer considered “revolutionary urban guerrilla warfare” an unrealistic fantasy. It was, in fact, her entire plan.

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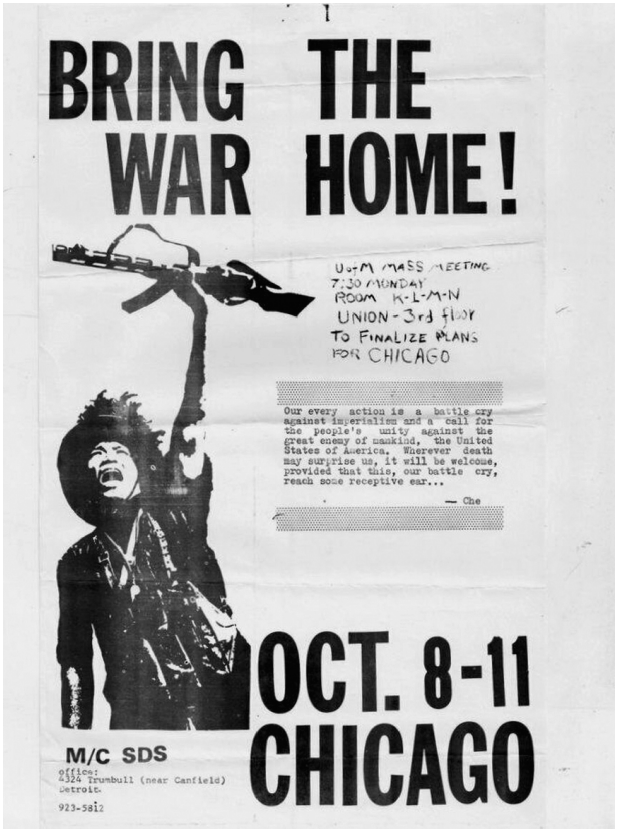
Part 3

Bring the War Home


BRING THE WAR HOME!
U of M MASS MEETING
7:30 MONDAY
ROOM K-L-M-N
UNION - 3rd FLOOR
TO FINALIZE PLANS
FOR CHICAGO
Our every action is a battle cry against imperialism and a call for the people's unity against the great enemy of mankind, the United States of America. Wherever death may surprise us, it will be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, reach some receptive ear...
— Che
OCT. 8-11
CHICAGO
M/C SDS
office:
4324 Trumbull (near Canfield)
Detroit
923-5812

Motor City SDS ("the Jesse James Gang") poster advertising the Days of Rage, 1969.

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Can You Try?

(Metropolitan Correctional Center, 1981)

Understanding my mother's revolutionary commitment was one of the most challenging tasks of my early childhood. When I was five years old and our family finally emerged from the underground, my mother was locked up in New York's Metropolitan Correctional Center for refusing to testify against her militant comrades in the Black Liberation Army.

Jamal Joseph, one of the eleven BLA members also imprisoned at the time, said that this level of solidarity was precisely what he expected. "I wasn't surprised that Bernardine refused to cooperate," he told me, "because their practice has been consistent—in their love for Black revolutionaries and their love for Black people."

All this was pretty abstract for me as a five-year-old. I knew, of course, that a person shouldn't tattle on a friend—that was a lesson I'd learned in preschool. I understood the value of loyalty; I was dedicated to my fellow Weather Kids and Panther Cubs in the underground. And I knew not to talk to the police. But as the days of our separation stretched into weeks and then months—as it went from sudden rupture to bleak routine—I started to wonder how my mother could continue to choose loyalty to her friends over love for us. I didn't understand the legal subtleties of her case, but I knew she was making a choice—day after day after day after day—not to come home.

And she knew it too. The letters she wrote me from MCC, which I rediscovered only recently, are full of explanations and reassurances—attempts to mitigate the pain she knew she was causing her kids and the guilt she must have felt.

My dearest ones

I am writing to make sure you know that I love you very much. Although they have put me in jail for a little while, I will come back as soon as I can because I want to be with you. Papa will explain again to you why they won't let me be free, but all the people who love freedom will help get me out soon.

Keep your spirits strong, do your work of playing and growing. Papa & I love you completely.

I will write you a lot.

mama

The letters are a window into my mother's thinking from that year, and a revelation to me now—not only about her own situation, but about her choice not to cooperate with the government, her relationship with us, and the philosophical basis of her entire decades-long revolutionary project, all distilled down so it could be understood (or misunderstood) by her five-year-old child:

Dear Zayd,

This is going to be a serious letter. BJ [the director of my preschool] told me you & her talk about how long I'll be in jail and what your job can be to help get me out.

At the very worst, they will keep me in jail until your next birthday, when you are 6. But maybe we will organize so many people against the grand jury and we will be lucky, and they will let me and the other women out soon?

I know it's very hard to not know. Already two months has been terribly long. Lots of times here I cry because I miss you so much and not being free is a horrible thing — people are meant to be free.

But you know that what the government is trying to make me do is unfair. I can't tell them about my friends because this government is only good to rich people, and they might hurt someone if I talk to them. So even tho it makes us all so sad and so mad I won't do it.

You make me feel strong Zayd, because you are so brave. I love you more each day – I smile at your pictures and drawings and send you rosy red light of love.

xxxxxxxxxx oooooooooo

Mama

I wasn't brave. I felt sick with grief and loneliness. I started wetting the bed again that year—for the first time since I was two. I retreated into a quiet, teeth-gritting watchfulness and stopped asking my father what was going to happen to us, when she would be home, how we would all survive. But apparently, my silence could be taken for stoicism. Not that I had much of a choice in the matter—there was very clearly nothing I could do.

As the months went on, my mother sent other letters and artifacts: a handmade calendar, sketches of her jail cell, and dozens of DIY kids' games for me to play—chessboards with pink and brown squares drawn in crayon; handwritten crossword puzzles, the clues full of nostalgia for her life outside and longing for the experience she must have known she was missing.

When mama gets out of jail, we'll go to the country and _____ each other.
This week at _____ Zayd took off his water wings and swam by himself.

Other times, she'd model for me her own brand of radical resistance, often writing her clues *as me*, in my five-year-old voice, but inflected with her own revolutionary politics—more child's play as political indoctrination:

I go to visit Bernardine in a jail called _____
She won't talk about her friends to the _____ _____
I went to court and saw the mean _____ who put her in jail.
The _____ at the jail wear keys and a walky-talky and are too nasty.

Sometimes she could be judgmental, even disapproving of me. After one especially difficult visit, she offered up some pointed criticism for my apparent lack of interracial solidarity.

Dear Zayd,
You really surprised me Sunday by how well you could do the crossword puzzle and remembering all the riddles. You are getting so big: bike riding, swimming, reading & spelling. You are beautiful.

> But one thing I'd like you to work on in a serious way. When you meet new people, grown-ups, you must say hello and look at them. It is a way of respecting people and being part of the human community. I wanted you to meet someone who was a friend of Zayd Shakur's [the Black Liberation Army member I was named for], and she wanted to meet you. But you didn't say hello or be polite so we didn't get to learn stories and she didn't get to see how wonderful you are. Can you try?

It was impossible for me to understand, back then, why my mother's loyalty to these apparent strangers seemed to outweigh her commitment to us, her own children. But there are clues hidden in her letters—for example, in her stray reference to "the human community." Like my father's, Bernardine's radical politics emanated from an unusually wide circle of empathy and intimate concern. For her, falling back on the "natural" love of a mother for her child to justify cooperating with the government would have felt like a betrayal of her larger cause, and of herself.

"I don't think that was even an option for her," my brother Malik told me, when I asked him about the choice she made back then. "Most people would have to think twice about getting arrested and leaving their kids behind. But knowing her, it just makes sense. There would never be a question about it . . . I guess it's weird, except people with character and values always stick to their values, right? People with *other* values, religious values, confronted with decisions that would seem tough to us, would stick to their values too, wouldn't they? I don't know. I just think it makes sense, knowing her."

It does make sense—knowing her. My mother has always believed, for as long as I've known her, that it's easy for people—especially white Americans—to focus our attention on those closest to us, and to use our love for our own families and communities as an excuse to avoid responsibility for the larger injustices in the world. To fight for *our* neighborhoods, *our* towns, *our* schools, and *our* kids at the expense of everyone else. My mother was never—could never have been—that person. Even if her own children wound up as collateral damage, her most profound commitments were not personal, but global.

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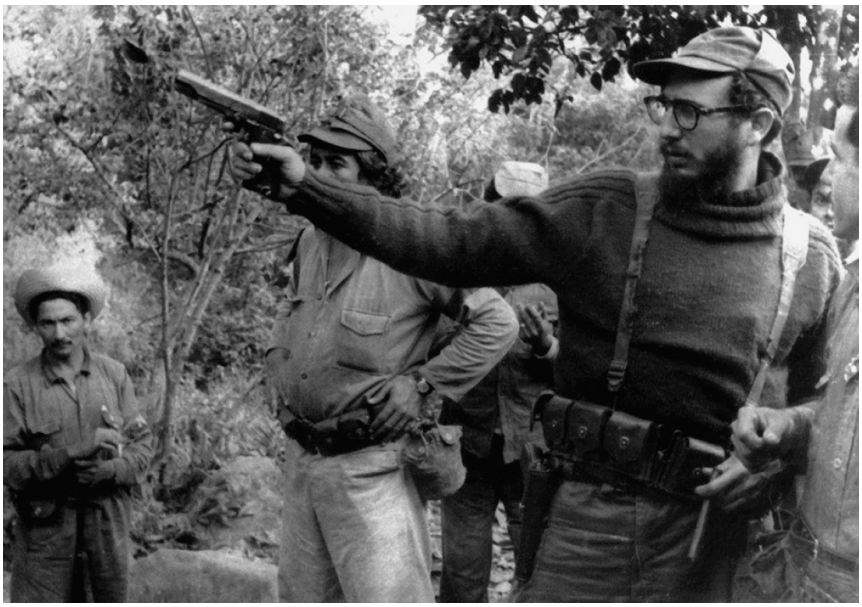
School for Radicals

(Havana/Chicago, 1969)

We are not nice; we are making history. Let our descendants remember us as warriors and not cowards; as men and not mice; as revolutionaries and not bootlickers.

—José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez, founder of the radical Puerto Rican independence group the Young Lords



Fidel Castro taking target practice when he was a young revolutionary, hiding out in Cuba’s Sierra Maestra mountains, underground, late 1950s.

On July 4, 1969, when she was twenty-eight years old, just two weeks after the split of SDS and the founding of Weatherman, Bernardine and a few friends boarded a plane for Mexico City.

The revolution was about to go global.

From there, these young aspiring militants would catch a flight to Havana to meet up with soldiers from the Vietnamese National Liberation Front, straight from the war’s front lines, some of whom had literally

walked the Ho Chi Minh Trail to Hanoi, to fly through Beijing to Moscow and on to Havana, to teach these young American activists how to fight back against the U.S. war machine. Their hosts would be Fidel Castro and his leftist Cuban government—the model and inspiration for all would-be revolutionists at the time.

Bernardine had told SDS she was going to follow the leadership of global anti-colonialist guerrillas; now she was about to meet them, in the flesh.

"Bernardine Dohrn . . . appears to be responsible for the international contact," wrote one of Hoover's special agents that summer. "[Her Cuba trip] clearly shows the publicly stated intention of SDS national leaders to move SDS into the position of a clandestine organization of Marxist-Leninist revolutionists which will . . . use force and violence to achieve their objectives in this country."

The FBI also cited a special report by the *Chicago Daily News*, "Cuba: School for U.S. Radicals," warning of a possible militant training camp being operated out of Havana by foreign spies: "Bernardine Dohrn, mini-skirted Weatherwoman, and 30 fellow activists met with Vietnamese communists in Havana in July 1969. Beyond any doubt, Cuba has shaped, supplied technical training to, given political indoctrination for, and perhaps most important of all, served as inspiration for the American radical movement in its avowed aim to bring down the American system that it so fiercely despises."

But when Bernardine arrived in Havana, the conference seemed less like the nefarious "school for radicals" the FBI feared and more like any college cultural exchange. Her itinerary was full of documentary film screenings, trips to museums and cultural sites, and even a field trip to the countryside to cut sugarcane, labor Fidel Castro himself described as "an antidote for 'bureaucratitis' and 'bourgeoisitis.'"

"It was horrible," my mom remembered. "It was very hot. So, you were in a total sweat. And you had a scythe, I can't remember what it was called, a Cuban thing [a cane knife]. And it was sticky. And we weren't—or I certainly wasn't—good at it. Our Cuban comrades would be moving ahead in their rows. And we would be pathetic. The cuts weren't right. It wasn't fast. It wasn't clean. We weren't used to doing that kind of work. But we did our best. And we did it for several days in a row."

Following their trip to the countryside, Bernardine and her friends spent a few days in Havana strolling the famous Malecón, drinking rum on the white sand beaches of Jibacoa, and partying all night at a local hotel.

"The Cubans would bring in all their musicians," she remembers, "and we would dance the night away. And the Vietnamese would sit up on the balcony—it was like a Motel 6 kind of square—they had chairs out on the balcony, and they watched us. They never participated. I don't know what they were thinking. They were thinking we were corrupt and debauched? They were thinking they needed us? Or they *wanted* us as part of their effort to throw out the Americans?"

But when the meetings finally began, Bernardine quickly got to work. Her notes—which were retrieved years later by the FBI from an underground safehouse—read like an earnest grad student's comments on a fascinating college lecture, full of thoughts, questions, and musings scrawled across the margins of her program:

Aim of revolution is to take power from reactionaries and give to people
Process is long and difficult . . .
Women's organizations and their relationship . . .
understand true nature of war—imperialism always tries to beautify its wars. . .
organizers must go deep into the masses

At the end of the week, the Vietnamese presented their foreign guests with metal rings supposedly forged from American warplanes shot down by the Viet Cong—a gift meant to symbolize their shared revolutionary commitment. "The war is entering its final phase," they told Bernardine. "You must begin to wage armed struggle as soon as possible to become the vanguard and take leadership of the revolution!"

My mother—founder of the Action Faction—didn't need to be convinced. If overthrowing the U.S. government had always seemed—probably was—an absurd pipe dream, spending time with these successful revolutionaries from overseas made it feel, if not realistic, at least within the realm of the possible. Her main takeaway from the trip wasn't practical technical training or tactical advice—the militant training camp version of

the “school for radicals” turned out to be mostly a figment of the FBI’s imagination—but a fundamental shift in self-conception.

In an interview a few years later, after she had gone underground, Bernardine told a documentary film crew that the Havana trip “made me a full-time revolutionary. And really changed my own idea of myself and what the revolution is going to be.”

* * *

While my mother was in Cuba in the summer of ’69, learning to make a global revolution, her friends in the new Weatherman faction were busy trying to build their own domestic school for radicals here at home.

Bill and Diana and Terry and the other SDS kids who had now become Weathermen knew they weren’t ready to go to war; they were still student activists, not soldiers. But they were increasingly determined to make themselves tougher and more militant—to prepare themselves for the coming revolutionary struggle.

But how do you do that? How do you rid yourself of your bedrock cultural values? Your middle-class privilege, complacency, and softness—the most basic background and perspectives you’ve grown up with? What if it’s in the basic mindset you’ve inherited, in the culture passed down to you from your earliest upbringing and the way you were taught to think about the world? Is it even possible to change yourself on such a fundamental, almost cellular level?

“We didn’t have a roadmap for how to do it,” Bill admitted when I asked him about this process. “We barely had any models. So, we looked again to the Third World to see what we could pick up.”

“Self-criticism” had first been developed in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist purges of the 1920s and 1930s, as a technique to rid the Communist Party of any lingering “bourgeois” or “counter-revolutionary” ideology. Decades later, the Little Red Guards of the Chinese Cultural Revolution adopted criticism and self-criticism (*ziwo pipan*, , and *jiǎntǎo*,) as tools to “reform” and “reeducate” the intellectuals and dissidents in their midst, following Mao’s famous edict, “Dust will accumulate if a room is not cleaned regularly, our faces will get dirty if they are not washed regularly. Our comrades’ minds and our Party’s work may also collect dust, and also need sweeping and washing.”

While this sounds to me like a worrisome exercise in anti-intellectualism and authoritarian groupthink, to the Weathermen in 1969 it apparently sounded like precisely the kind of ideological boot camp they had in mind—an urgent and necessary crash course in how to cleanse themselves of their own counter-revolutionary ideas, to reimagine their identities, and discipline even their innermost thoughts.

"I subscribed at the time to the ethic that there was corruption, racism *inside of me*," remembers Weatherwoman Eleanor Stein, "and I had an obligation to rid myself of that."

So, in the summer of 1969, as their generational peers gathered at Woodstock for "3 Days of Peace and Music," the Weathermen took themselves back to school.

* * *

Here's how it worked: a group of young activists would gather at a collective in Detroit or Chicago or New York—twenty to forty young people packed into the living room of a small apartment, scattered around on couches or on the floor, a crowded, sweaty mix of bodies, cigarette and weed smoke—for a DIY "struggle session." One person would start in the middle, standing or sitting alone in a chair. And the others would begin by asking questions:

"What have you done today to advance the revolution?"
"When was the last time you called your parents? What did you say?"
"Why are you still dressed like that? How much money did you spend on those clothes? Your shoes? On that hair?"

It would only get more intense from there. Close friends would bring up things you did that day, words you said, books you were reading, movies you liked. They would criticize your clothes, your hygiene, the visible evidence of male chauvinism or white privilege still imprinted on your body. They would delve into your romantic or sexual infatuations, point out that people were dying—*right now!*—in Vietnam. Black people were getting killed by cops, *right now, all around you!* And you still care about

petty things? Your shallow hobbies and romances? Your own small, pathetic, irrelevant vanities?

As the session went on, often lasting all night, the person at the center of the circle would slowly shrink into her chair. Dissolve in tears. Or even join in:

> "When we confronted those cops at the protest, I was scared. I didn't want to get hurt. So, I hung back. But I should have been more aggressive when—"
> "I called my sister on the phone today. We spent about an hour catching up. I should have called her out on her bullshit about—"
> "I went to the movies last night. What a waste of time. I could have spent those hours working, training, or raising money for—"

As in any military hazing or cult initiation, the goal was to exhaust the subject and break them down—to eliminate a person's ego, so she could be built back up again as a true member of the collective. "That would be the end of a successful criticism/self-criticism," says Eric Mann. "The person would be crying, deeply apologetic—'I have sinned, and I realize the error of my ways.' And then the group would forgive them, like Catholicism."

"You get whipped more," my family friend and Weatherwoman Kathy Boudin recalled, "and the more you get whipped, the more you feel like you're becoming purified."

Here's how my dad described one particularly painful, memorable self-criticism session to me, when I asked him what the sessions were like. "One day after the morning routine," he said, "a woman and I, a comrade and I, went to a movie and got ice cream and I read her a poem. I read a poem by Brecht."

> You, who shall emerge from the flood
> In which we are sinking,
> Think —
> When you speak of our weaknesses,
> Also of the dark time
> That brought them forth . . .

Bill says he thought in that moment he was confiding in a friend—an honest, intimate confession about what was being lost in the single-minded

fight against injustice, his feeling of ambivalence about having to act tough all the time, his complex and contradictory emotions about signing up for a war. But later that night, back at the Weather collective, that woman called him out during a criticism/self-criticism session. “He read me this fucking poem,” she told the group. “We had ice cream. I’m critical of myself, but I’m mostly critical of him. Fucking *Brecht*.”

Poetry. Ice cream. A private, intimate conversation. Admitting to any self-doubt or weakness. Even Brecht—the Communist revolutionary playwright—was now considered too soft for life in what they half-jokingly called “the Weather Machine.” It showed that Bill wasn’t committed enough to the cause. He was hesitant. Emotional. He still wasn’t hardcore enough.

“And that was heartbreaking,” he remembered. “And I immediately said, ‘Thank you for your encouragement’ and got right back in line.”

What’s striking to me now is not the criticism, or even the cultlike behavior of the group, but Bill’s passive reaction—how uncharacteristic it is, in terms of the person I’ve come to know. As a teacher, as a parent, my father has always been all about letting kids experiment, letting *me* experiment. If anything, as a teacher and a parent, he tends to err on the side of freedom bordering on anarchy, often emphasizing radical risk-taking and self-expression even at the expense of basic order and discipline. Criticism/self-criticism is the opposite of that. It’s about erasing individuality and freedom, enforcing ideological obedience and conformity.

“It became kind of ugly,” Bill admits, “and I think unnecessary. I think it was wrong. I think it was macho. But I also understand the impulse to act collectively and to make each other act collectively.”

If my father still sounds somewhat ambivalent about the self-criticism sessions, Weatherman Mark Rudd is much more unequivocal. “We had unwittingly reproduced conditions that all hermetically sealed cults use,” he wrote in his memoir. “Isolation, sleep deprivation, demanding arbitrary acts of loyalty to the group, even sexual initiation as bonding.”

This is another part of the cultlike reeducation in the Weather Machine: partner-swapping, group sex, the breaking down of monogamous relationships—because romantic commitment supposedly proved that some Weatherpeople were still bound up in traditional bourgeois norms of women as property. “There was just so much experimentation with sex,” Kathy

Boudin later told me. “Sex with women, sex with men, sex in orgies—all of that.”

These young activists, remember, had grown up in the 1950s, with all the boring expectations about gender roles, monogamy, and abstinence that era entailed. Some members, like Eleanor Stein, were already married when they joined the movement—to their college sweethearts—and were eager to try something new. “For me and I think for many other women,” she told me, “[sexual experimentation] was kind of a freeing experience. I left a relationship. It was voluntary. I wasn’t forced to do it. I don’t look back on that as a terrible thing.” But for other Weatherwomen, like Cathy Wilkerson, the sexual free-for-all could feel oppressive. “It was confusing because a lot of Weathermen *were* women,” she says, “so it was not immediately apparent to me the profound kind of sexism that existed in it. Men could sleep with whoever they wanted to whenever they wanted to, basically.”

At the time, this was all politicized and intellectualized—mandatory promiscuity and partner-swapping dressed up in the rhetoric of feminist liberation. But for all their revolutionary rhetoric and quasi-Maoist political doctrine, these were still college kids and grad students in their teens and early twenties.

It was also 1969. Everyone in the country seemed to be having new sexual experiences, discovering new identities, getting in touch with their desires in new and unexpected ways. This was the summer, after all, not just of Woodstock, but of Stonewall. Of *Midnight Cowboy.* Of John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s infamous “bed-in.” The sexual revolution was erupting all around them. And if the young Weathermen were sleeping around, “discovering themselves,” experimenting with sex and romantic commitment and gender roles, they were part of a long tradition of post-adolescent taboo-breakers, from Anaïs Nin to today’s pansexual polycules.

“I think it’s really important to remember,” Bill told me, “about the Black Panthers, about the Weathermen—we were nineteen years old. I mean, remember what it’s like to be nineteen? All the sexual politics . . . Those are kids! You know, we may have put an ideological gloss on it. But we were kids doing what kids do.”

* * *

On her trip back to the U.S. aboard the Cuban rum boat *Manuel Ascunce*, Bernardine says she was exhausted; she stayed in her cabin and slept most of the way home. Havana had been inspiring, but draining too. She'd felt a lot of responsibility to make sure the trip was a success, to represent America's revolutionary youth movement on the global stage. She was relieved to have pulled it off, but now she felt desperate for a break.

That break would be a long time coming. If my mother had been on the radar of U.S. law enforcement before—as co-leader of SDS and now founder of Weatherman—the Havana trip took it to a whole new level. American intelligence agents now believed she had been recruited into an international revolutionary conspiracy by a hostile foreign power's spies.

There were even later reports that the Cuban embassies in New York and Ottawa aided Bernardine and her friends once they went underground, though she denies this and it was never confirmed, either in the press or in court. Larry Grathwohl, one of the FBI's undercover informants, offered up "reports" and "hard evidence" that the Weathermen had contacts not only in Cuba, North Vietnam, and China, but also in the Quebec Liberation Front, the Irish Republican Army, and the Palestinian resistance group El Fatah—including an "Arab guerrilla" he said he knew only as "Ali Baba." But the FBI could never verify Grathwohl's increasingly fantastical claims, and the Bureau reluctantly reported to Nixon in 1969 and again in 1970 that they could find no real evidence of foreign backing of the Weathermen.

Ultimately, the claim of foreign espionage tied to the domestic radical movement seems to have been overblown—a product of domestic politics more than concrete intelligence. Bernardine's friend Tom Hayden, however, remembered this suggestive anecdote: "'I asked Bernardine about right-wing charges of Cuban guerrilla training," he later wrote. "She waved away the question, saying, 'I never favored any outside support.' By contrast, she laughed, during a later trip to North Korea, she and SDS were offered weapons, training, and funding by Pyongyang. The only prerequisite, she said, was to watch a lengthy propaganda film about North Korea's revolution, which she found unbearable. She walked out of the theater and the offer."

I asked my mother about all this but she insisted she doesn't remember that conversation with Tom. In fact, she's pretty blasé about the espionage accusations in general. "I knew a couple of people who were recruited by the Cubans," she admitted. "I mean, literally recruited and spent the next

decades of their life back here in the United States as Cuban operatives . . . They certainly didn't do that with me. But were they looking to? Probably. Of course."

It didn't matter. By the time Bernardine's boat docked in the U.S., she was the target of multiple federal investigations, by the FBI and the CIA, and the focus of hearings in both the House and the Senate. I asked her if she was aware of the attention—I thought she might have been at least a bit uncomfortable, at twenty-eight, of being accused of treason and international espionage. But she laughed this off, too. "Yeah. But we just thought they were stupid," she said. "I mean, I was aware of it. But I discounted it entirely. I thought they were fools. They didn't see what was really happening."

What was really happening, in Bernardine's view, was a radical shift in American culture and a growing realization, especially among young people like her, that the democratic political process had failed: that the House, the Senate, and the president were standing in the way of progress; that the government was out of date.

It was time for a revolution.

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The Days of Rage

(Magnificent Mile, 1969)

In times of revolution, just wars and wars of liberation, I love the angels of destruction and disorder!

—Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther Party minister of information, 1969

The Days of Rage. J.J. center, in vintage football helmet. Bill next to him, in glasses and hoodie. On the right, in a newsboy cap and shades, is Bill's best friend, Terry Robbins.

On October 8, 1969, my mother stood alone on a platform in Chicago's Lincoln Park, a North Vietnamese flag whipping in the wind behind her. A bonfire fed by wood slats torn from park benches lit her face dramatically from below.

"Just think," she yelled through a bullhorn, "only this number had the courage to come here—you are truly a vanguard!"

A howl went up from the crowd. Spread across the park in front of her were three hundred Weathermen in football helmets, heavy denims, gas

masks, and knee pads. Some carried baseball bats, slingshots, and steel pipes. Others had stuffed their pockets with marbles or jacks to scatter in front of horses or squad cars. A few had brought along M-80 firecrackers, or spray cans of oven cleaner to use as DIY mace.

They were suited up for battle. And they were scared to death.

For all their militant posturing, the Weathermen were still not soldiers; many were here precisely because they *didn't* want to fight in Vietnam. But they had spent months preparing for this moment: karate lessons in the park to learn to take a hit and throw a punch, criticism/self-criticism sessions to root out any lingering cowardice or self-doubt, gut-checks and amphetamines to stay relentless and hyperfocused. They had done everything they could think of to turn themselves into street fighters. They were about to find out whether it had worked.

"We refuse to be 'good Germans'!" Bernardine called out across the crowd. "We live behind enemy lines!"

The Weathermen had been planning this protest for months. Ever since she returned from Havana, Bernardine had been working nonstop to organize a big radical demonstration in Chicago—the "Bring the War Home" action. The plan was simple: to show, in the most vivid, confrontational way possible, that America's children were ready to put their bodies on the line to protest the war and to pull the attention of law enforcement away from their friends in the Black Panther Party, who were being targeted with illegal surveillance, arrests, and even police violence.

"In our first discussions with the Panthers and the [Young] Lords," Bernardine and her friends wrote in the summer of '69, "they raised strong reservations about the action, saying that white people did not have to go through mass struggle in the streets in order to build a revolutionary consciousness. However, the National Panther Party, through Bobby Seale and David Hilliard, indicated that they would support the action—though not work actively on it—and discussions with the Illinois Chapter, as well as with the Young Lords, will continue."

"Kick ass is the main message we brought back from [Cuba]," Bernardine wrote in a special edition of *New Left Notes* that summer. "Some people are saying that now we should be fighting to end the war now; kicking ass is for later. Building a revolutionary movement is for later. Bullshit. Fighting to end the war, to bring it home, is the same as building a

revolutionary movement. Right now the only way we're going to build a white fighting force is if we become one ourselves."

The government, of course, had other plans. Ever since the split of SDS, the FBI had focused the "major thrust" of its New Left counterintelligence activity against the new Weatherman group. More than two thousand full-time FBI agents had been assigned to Weather-related investigations. And the Chicago police "Red Squad" had opened its own file, deeming SDS "a radical organization, Communist infiltrated," labeling the Weathermen "crazies" and "mad dogs," and setting out to disrupt their coming protest.

On August 22, Chicago police pulled over Bernardine and Weatherman Jeff Jones, her new boyfriend, for lacking brake lights. Cops searched the car and found an unlicensed handgun and "vials, believed to be dangerous drugs" in Bernardine's purse. She was arrested for the first time in her life. And in a sign of the government's growing obsession with her, the FBI teletype reporting this minor drug bust was cc'd not only to Hoover but to "other interested agencies," including the military, the Secret Service, and even Nixon's White House. Two weeks later, a judge dismissed the case without trial. The "dangerous drugs" had turned out to be twenty prescription sleeping pills, and the judge ruled the search of Jeff's car illegal and inadmissible in any case. "You can jail revolutionaries," the Weathermen taunted the cops in a *New Left Notes* editorial, channeling their hero and inspiration Fred Hampton, "but you can't jail the revolution!"

A few weeks after that, Bernardine was arrested again—this time at the Davis Cup tennis tournament, at an antiwar rally that devolved into a "knock-down, drag-out battle" with police. She was charged with disorderly conduct, made bail, but was arrested again a week later at a demonstration in support of the Chicago 8, where she was charged with "mob action."

"It just was all happening very fast," she told me. "I, who hadn't been arrested ever in my life, was suddenly arrested almost weekly—boom, boom, boom, boom—like that. Police were after us. They were following us. They were stopping me whenever I was in a car."

If all this was happening to Bernardine, the most visible face of the organization, the invisible, illegal harassment of rank-and-file Weathermen could be much worse. In the lead-up to the "Bring the War Home" protest, Red Squad cops burst into the Chicago collective one night with guns drawn, herded the women into a bedroom, and dangled Weatherman Robbie Roth out a third-floor window by his ankles. Another of Bernardine's

friends, Russ Neufeld, found himself dragged into police headquarters following a protest: “These cops put .38 caliber guns in our mouths and said if we moved, they’d blow our brains out,” he remembered. “Then they took [Weatherman] Danny Cohen and pistol-whipped him. I swear, they broke every bone in Danny’s face, blood everywhere. Joe and I stood there with guns in our mouths, forced to watch.”

In response, Weathermen bought their own guns—.38 revolvers—and started carrying them around in public, again in imitation of their Black Panther heroes. Whenever she spoke, Bernardine was flanked by armed bodyguards—the toughest, most street-smart members of the group they could find, like Brian Flanagan, an Irish former boxer singled out for his loyalty and willingness to take, and throw, a punch.

Their fight with the police was escalating—and the mood among the Weathermen was growing increasingly paranoid and dark. “Right before the Days of Rage,” Bill remembers, “we were in an apartment in Hyde Park, and we were arguing about something, and [Terry] punched me. And I punched him back. That’s the only time I ever hit a friend.”

I asked him what the fight was about, and he shrugged. “I can’t remember,” he admitted. “But something intense.”

Terry had always been intense, but now his focus was becoming almost frightening. Bill says his close friend rarely slept, spent practically all his time working, and had started having waking hallucinations—prophetic visions where he “saw himself in dreams.” And then, a few days before the upcoming street protest, Terry had a new idea. He wanted to build a bomb.

* * *

On the West Side of Chicago, in the city’s historic Haymarket Square, stood a bronze statue of a police officer mounted on a 12-foot marble pedestal—a monument to a deadly confrontation between police and radical anarchists nearly a century earlier. In May 1886, Chicago police had tried to disperse a crowd of workers striking for the eight-hour workday. Someone hurled a metal sphere filled with dynamite into the ranks of police; it exploded, and in the ensuing chaos the panicked cops opened fire. Seven officers and at least four civilians were killed, and eight prominent anarchists were later rounded up; seven of them were hanged. It was the first “Red scare” in American history.

The Haymarket 8 were ultimately commemorated by the labor movement with the establishment of May 1 as International Workers' Day. Chicago police commemorated the incident with a statue to themselves.

Everything about the statue seemed expressly designed to piss off the anti-establishment, anti-cop Weathermen: the imperious posture of the old-timey officer, the violent anti-labor history it evoked, and the authoritarian Newspeak inscription on its pedestal:

IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE
OF ILLINOIS
I COMMAND
PEACE

The Chicago Haymarket monument, twentieth century.

When Terry suggested taking down the statue, the other Weathermen were into the idea right away. But there was a problem: the officer's bronze boots were bolted into solid marble and concrete. They couldn't knock the statue over themselves, and they didn't have any heavy construction equipment, or a mob of hundreds of people with ropes and chains. So, this group of college dropouts and grad students did what they'd been trained to do their entire lives—they started studying. "In terms of making bombs?"

Bill remembers. “I honestly think that we were learning from looking at a textbook.”

They were—reading from a literal textbook. I found a copy: *The Blasters’ Handbook*, 15th edition, published by the DuPont Chemical Company and intended for commercial use by construction and coal mining firms, its cover emblazoned with the catchy slogan, “From America’s oldest explosives company come the newest explosive ideas!”

The Weathermen had scrounged a few sticks of dynamite from a friend who worked in construction. Following instructions in the *The Blasters’ Handbook*, Terry wrapped the sticks in duct tape, forming a cylinder about the size of a flashlight. He attached a long fuse to the blasting cap. And then, on October 6, he and three friends drove out to Haymarket Square—which was then an isolated, rundown, industrial part of town. It seemed deserted when they arrived, around 10 p.m. One of them climbed up on the pedestal, slid the cylinder between the cop’s massive legs, lit the fuse, dropped down to the street, and they all took off running, giddy with adrenaline. They jumped back in the car, slammed the doors, and waited.

But nothing happened. The streets remained quiet.

They started to worry. This was their first time using explosives. Maybe Terry had misread the handbook, or miscalculated. Maybe the wind on Chicago’s West Side had blown out their makeshift fuse. Maybe the dynamite was just no good.

Then suddenly—they could feel it before they heard a sound—a wave of energy swept through their bodies, leaving them breathless and quiet. Then the blast shook the car—ringing in their ears and shattering windows up and down the block. The explosion knocked the statue completely off its pedestal and tore it in half, flinging the bronze legs all the way into the northbound lanes of the nearby Kennedy Expressway.

The next morning, a fuming Mayor Richard Daley called the explosion “an act of disrespect” toward the police and “an attack on all the citizens of Chicago.”

“It is time for the people of Chicago and the nation to wake up to what we are opposing,” agreed Lt. James A. O’Neill, president of the Police Lieutenants Association. “These are not harmless kids with firecrackers!” And the president of the Chicago Police Sergeants Association, Sgt. Richard M. Barrett, promised all-out war with protestors the following day. “The blowing up of the only police monument in the United States,” he said, “is

an obvious declaration of war between the police and the SDS and other anarchist groups. We now feel that it is kill or be killed."

The next morning, Bill made his way to Chicago's Lincoln Park, where the Weathermen were planning to kick off their "Bring the War Home" demonstration. He remembers walking by lines of police officers, roadblocks set up on nearly every corner, thousands of riot cops called in to keep order, and dozens more reinforcements in parked city buses—a massive show of force by city police. But the Weathermen were expecting their own big crowd: thousands and thousands of young people recruited from all over the country, over countless meetings and speeches on college campuses that summer, ready to reprise the protests at the Democratic National Convention a year earlier—only this time the student protestors would be ready to fight back.

Bill met up with Diana and Terry near the park, and together they headed to the planned meeting spot, to see the massive guerrilla army they had assembled. But there were only a few hundred people there, milling around a half-empty clearing.

"It was a feeling of depression," Bill remembers. "A feeling of the wind getting knocked out of you. It was overwhelming. Because I thought we were going to battle with several thousand troops. And then I realize—*Oh my God, we're going to battle with just us*."

The headlines in the papers that morning had been all about the Haymarket bombing and the furious police response. Activists getting ready to head downtown for the protest had been forced to decide: did they really want to be associated with dynamite? Were they prepared to go to war with thousands of enraged Chicago riot cops ready to kill or be killed?

Most were not. And this, of course, is one of the more predictable results of extremism and factionalism, then and now. By splitting SDS, emphasizing escalation over inclusion, turning to criticism/self-criticism sessions, insisting that only the most militant and committed activists were welcome in their group, the Weathermen quickly found themselves outnumbered and alone.

"It's kind of a telling moment," Bill admits. "Because part of me wants to run and give up. And part of me says we *cannot* give up at this point."

That's when Bernardine took the stage, calling the Weathermen a vanguard fighting behind enemy lines. "There is a war going on and we are

not the ones who started that war," she shouted into her bullhorn. "We're here to bring that war home!"

The Weathermen howled again in response. They beat their pipes against trash can lids and thumped baseball bats on the frozen ground.

"Then J.J. gets up," Weatherman Brian Flanagan told me, "and says, 'We won't all survive today!' And I said, 'Oh shit. I don't really feel like dying right now.'"

Finally, Bernardine's new boyfriend Jeff Jones (not "J.J.," whose name was John Jacobs)—a tall, blond, handsome, surfer-looking Weatherman from California—jumped up on the platform. Jeff didn't need to make a big speech; Bernardine had already primed the crowd. He shouted just four words—

"I AM MARION DELGADO!"

—and everyone started to run. A mob of three hundred people, including Bill, Terry, and Diana, wheeled out of Lincoln Park, heading for the fancy shopping district of Chicago's Magnificent Mile, chanting slogans as they ran:

"Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh!"
"Power to the People!"
"I am Marion Delgado!"

As they hit downtown, someone threw a rock—a window shattered on the second floor of the Chicago Historical Society—and that set off the rest. Rioters started smashing everything in sight, hurling bricks, taking bats to the windshields of parked cars.

"I see bank windows crashing," Bill remembers. "People have billy clubs—they're smashing windows. And every window that's smashed, a sense of elation rushes through me and through the whole crowd—every time a window breaks, I feel my legs go into overdrive!"

Up ahead, they could all see a police barricade forming at the intersection: flashing red and blue lights, a line of riot cops, a lieutenant in a white shirt shouting into a bullhorn.

An ululating sound rose up from the Weathermen—an imitation of the street protests in the film *The Battle of Algiers*. Ridiculous, maybe, but it must have been surreal for the cops—to see three hundred American college

kids kitted out as post-apocalyptic road warriors, howling a primal battle cry as they sprinted toward the line of heavily-armed police.

The cops launched tear gas canisters into the crowd; Terry picked one up and hurled it back. Police fired warning shots, but the protestors just kept coming. Finally, the cops fired shotguns and pistols directly into the front ranks, injuring more than half a dozen Weathermen. But they didn't stop; they weren't turning around; they weren't even slowing down. The rioters hurled themselves head-on into the blockade.

"We see a line of police and aren't exactly sure what to do," Bill says. "And we just plow right into them."

"It's mayhem!" adds Brian Flanagan. "We're in a suicidal fight with the cops. It was just— *the shit was on*. You know? *It was on.* That's all. Just a battle broke loose in the streets."

Police started beating protestors with batons and blackjacks, tackling them to the pavement, hauling them to waiting wagons. But this time, the protestors fought back—with chains and clubs and fists, hurling rocks and ball bearings, knocking over police motorcycles.

"Windows were smashed!" recalled Weatherman (and cousin of Yoko Ono) Shin'ya Ono. "Rolls-Royces and Cadillacs and every other car in the ruling-class neighborhood were smashed! Some pigs were overpowered and vamped on severely. Within a few minutes all of us lost whatever fear and doubts we had before. Each one of us felt the soldier in us. Within a minute or two, right in front of my eyes, I saw and felt the transformation of the mob into a battalion of three hundred revolutionary fighters!"

Terry must have been delighted; it was boy-wrecks-train-style mayhem.

* * *

The next morning, Illinois governor Richard Ogilvie mobilized the state's National Guard to quell the riots; troops were placed on high alert in the city's armories, and 2,500 armed Guardsmen patrolled the streets. Downtown Chicago had been turned into a war zone.

Weathermen responded with a women's march—more than seventy helmeted Weatherwomen, led by Bernardine herself, struck out on foot, heading for the armed forces induction center. When police blocked their way, the women—determined to show they could be just as aggressive as their men—charged the cops, and when an officer tried to tackle Bernardine

to the ground, she kicked him in the balls. She was arrested for the fourth time in as many weeks, charged with battery, mob action, and resisting arrest.

Bernardine at the women's march, Days of Rage, October 1969.

One Weatherwoman remembers seeing Bernardine that night in her cell: "alone in a languid pose, her face composed into a mask of contempt . . . She looked like a fashion model—short black leather jacket, nice slacks, neat purple blouse, the boots—everything just so . . . She possessed a splendor all her own—like a queen . . . a high priestess, a mythological silhouette."

That's not exactly how my mother remembers it. She says she was scared and worried that night—for her friends who had been hurt and about the impact of the riot on the larger movement. But she also says she felt grimly determined to hold the line—to show that Weathermen, like the Panthers, could take whatever the cops could dish out.

It turned out to be a lot.

Over the next four days, Chicago police arrested 250 protestors, shot six and injured many more. Nearly everyone involved in the Days of Rage faced indictments and a new round of police and FBI investigations. Many were nursing cuts and bruises, missing teeth and bloodied mouths, shattered cheekbones, broken bones, gunshot wounds.

Twenty-three policemen were also hurt, and law enforcement officials like FBI agent Bill Dyson were bewildered by the apparently senseless violence. "These people are running up and down the Gold Coast of Chicago," Dyson says, "smashing windows in stores and businesses, smashing car windows. And to achieve what? You can overthrow the government by doing this? This is crazy!"

Mayor Daley, who a year earlier had sicced his police on peaceful protestors at the Democratic National Convention, was beside himself with indignation. "What right does anyone have to walk down the street with a chain in their hand?" he sputtered to reporters. "Or a club—which we saw last night used on police—or an iron pipe? You know quite well that they're not playing hockey, unless they're playing hockey with someone's head!"

Perhaps more surprising, and telling, Illinois Panther chairman Fred Hampton sounded almost equally critical of the Days of Rage. "We think it's anarchistic, opportunistic, and individualistic," he told a camera crew from ABC News. "It's chauvinistic. It's Custeristic, and that's the bad part about it. It's Custeristic in that its leaders take people into situations where the people can be massacred, and they call it revolution!"

This friendly fire must have stung—the Weathermen, especially my mom, considered Fred a friend and a role model—but his criticism underlined a stark consensus: from Progressive Labor to Mayor Daley to the police and the FBI, people across the political spectrum condemned the Days of Rage riots as a strategic failure, if not an outright catastrophe for the movement. Unlike Dr. King's march at Selma, or the 1968 DNC protest in Chicago, which had produced indelible images of out-of-control cops attacking peaceful demonstrators, the Days of Rage had flipped the script. Now the protestors seemed to be the aggressive ones, violent and out of control, sparking a pitched battle with police on the streets of a major American city.

It was a clear loss in the court of public opinion.

But the times were changing—and while it may not have been clear in the moment, October 1969 marked the beginning of a new phase of more militant, violent anti-government protest across the country. And some key voices in the movement sounded a lot more sympathetic about the Days of Rage.

Tom Hayden and other members of the Chicago 8, on trial nearby for their role in the ’68 DNC protest, refused to condemn the Weathermen for escalating the struggle, concluding that “America reaps what she sows.” And the Cuban state press covered the Days of Rage as a prime example of international anti-imperialist solidarity met with racist American police violence. In Vietnam, the widow of National Liberation Front martyr Nguyen Van Troi wrote a letter praising the “Autumn Offensive” of her “young friends and other Americans who promote peace and justice.”

Even more important, at least to the Weathermen, were some words of encouragement from inside the Black Panther Party itself. While Fred Hampton had been critical of their action, the BPP was no more a monolith than SDS. The party had its own internal rifts, its own moderates and militants—and there were Panthers across the country, and around the world, who cheered this evidence of violent escalation from their allied white “mother country radicals.”

Eldridge Cleaver, the Party’s minister of information, was by then the leader of the Panther’s “international wing,” a kind of action faction within the larger party. He and his more militarized East Coast allies would soon play a key role in the next chapter of the movement, as well as my family’s story. And Eldridge seemed downright fired up about the Days of Rage. “Much of the criticism of the Weathermen that has come to my attention,” he wrote, “seems to me to be reactionary, invalid and valuable only to the enemy. Stop and think. Did we ever pay attention to white radicals when they told us to keep our shoot-outs nice and clean and middle-class orderly? In times of revolution, just wars and wars of liberation, I love the angels of destruction and disorder as opposed to the devils of conservation and law-and-order . . . Those who can’t stand the sight of blood, especially their own, should stay home and pray.”

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The Crowd

(Magnificent Mile, 1990)

In 1990, when I was fourteen years old, my parents took me to a street protest in Chicago. America was about to go back to war. Just two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and right at the beginning of what was supposed to be a long, prosperous, post-Cold War "Pax Americana," the United States was preparing to launch its largest ground invasion since Vietnam: Operation Desert Storm.

The demonstrations that month were massive. Millions of people took to the streets across the world—100,000 in London, 15,000 in Tokyo, 400,000 in Algiers—and there were more than eighty marches across the U.S., in San Francisco, New York, LA, and Washington, DC, along with the thousands streaming through the streets of Chicago: the upscale shopping district of the Magnificent Mile, the same stretch of downtown where the Weathermen had rioted, almost exactly twenty years earlier, during the Days of Rage.

My parents were nearing fifty, and I was worried about them. So, as we marched, I tried to keep an eye out, to clear a way through the chaos and make sure they didn't get jostled or trampled in the crowd.

Police flanked the street, on horseback or lining metal barriers, shouting orders through bullhorns. But the mood on the street that day was friendly, even festive. Protestors carried giant puppet effigies of George Bush and Dick Cheney; hard-left groups and socialist organizations handed out fliers and newspapers that nobody would ever read; little kids sat balanced on their parents' shoulders, chanting along and singing songs, just like I used to do when I was a kid.

We carried signs: "No Blood for Oil."

We chanted slogans: "Whose streets? Our streets!"

I felt, honestly, a bit embarrassed by the whole thing.

By this point in my life, I'd been to literally hundreds of protests: for abortion rights and nuclear disarmament; against South African apartheid, CIA assassinations, and racist police violence; to undam the Klamath and to save the whales. In my family, we went to protests and demonstrations the way some families go tailgating—a near-weekly ritual of family bonding and community and tradition. And I agreed, in an overall sense, with the message of the march that day; I didn't want to go to war in Iraq, and I didn't want anyone else to have to go in my place. Even without the draft, as a fourteen-year-old boy, military service felt both threatening and close to home. I was both selfishly and altruistically opposed to this war.

But marching in protests always made me feel self-conscious and out of place, like a bad extra in a movie, playing an assigned role. I could never quite conjure my parents' sincere commitment, their obviously whole-hearted enthusiasm for a cause. Still, I was doing my awkward best that day—chanting along with the people around me, trying to stay on rhythm—when suddenly the street around us got quiet and I could hear, just over my shoulder, the rhythmic pounding of boots on pavement.

A wave of fear and confusion rippled through the crowd, and I felt that sharp adrenaline rush of being chased—the fight-or-flight instinct that kicks in on a deserted street late at night when something scary feels like it's coming up fast, right behind you.

A group of young people were jogging up the street in a tight military formation—forty or fifty of them—dressed all in black, their faces covered with balaclavas or scarves. Some wore helmets. Many carried bats, or crowbars, or rocks and bricks in their gloved hands. It was the left anarchist Black Bloc—debuted just a year earlier at the Berkeley Anarchist Riot and soon to become notorious for the "Battle for Seattle" protests—strapped up and ready for a fight.

The cops had already spotted the new line of protestors and were moving to head them off. Police in matte black riot gear used metal batons and shields and the flanks of their horses to push other demonstrators out of the way, to cordon off the militants from the larger, more peaceful crowd.

But the anarchists kept coming. In fact, they sped up, breaking into a sprint as they approached the police barricade. Nearby, someone had dragged a metal trash can into the middle of the street and lit its contents on fire. Black smoke billowed over our heads, making the horses rear away

from the line as the mounted officers struggled to rein them in, to get them back under control.

I looked for my parents again, still worried they might get jostled or crushed in the crowd. I caught a glimpse of my mom standing on the curb, calm and composed as usual, and felt momentarily relieved.

And then I saw my dad.

He was helping two masked anarchists drag a second trash can into position—they set this one on fire, too—and then Bill was running back over to me, eyes wide with excitement as he waved me to his side.

"Let's go!"

Suddenly the two of us were running together, in the middle of a mob, veering down a side street, dodging barricades. The anarchists around us were smashing car headlights, throwing bricks. A plate glass window fell like a curtain of water and splashed at our feet.

We'd already left the cops far behind as they scrambled to set up a new perimeter, radioing ahead for reinforcements. And for just a moment, *I got it*. All my self-consciousness fell away, and I was just part of the crowd, surging up State Street at a dead run, breaking windows as we ran.

Of course I knew, in the back of my mind, that smashing up downtown Chicago wasn't going to help the cause or stop the war. But that rational thought was overwhelmed by the rush of *doing something*. Not just chanting slogans or holding up signs, performing a vague, virtue-signaling opposition to an invasion practically already underway, but out on the front lines, taking action, fighting back for real. It felt like being connected to something larger, stronger, and older than myself—like being picked up and carried along on a primal wave of collective passion and determination and rage.

It only lasted a minute.

A massive line of police was already converging up ahead—way too many for us to fight or dodge—and at each intersection we passed, a couple more anarchists darted down an alley or a side street, ditching their gear and melting back into the crowd to disappear. Bill and I finally turned a corner too, pausing to catch our breath and make sure we weren't being followed before we circled back to find my mom and tell her our story.

By this point, I was feeling embarrassed again. It wasn't just the nagging feeling I always had that I didn't belong at these political events, that I lacked some fundamental whole-heartedness that other people—

especially my parents—seemed to feel for a cause. And it wasn't that I minded being swept up into an illegal, potentially dangerous action. It was the somehow shameful realization that my forty-seven-year-old father had dragged *me* into a riot. That I had hung back, a reluctant observer, while he was so instantly willing—eager and determined—to join the fight.

* * *

I asked my father once, when I was nine or ten, if he had ever been in a real fight or ever punched someone. I think I had in mind the sporadic schoolyard violence at my public school in New York—how I might stand up to, or avoid, a bully in my third-grade class. But when Bill said yes, I felt shocked by the admission. It was impossible to imagine the man I knew—my patient father, who had always taught me and my brothers to resolve our differences peacefully—as physically confrontational or even violent.

"Beware of the crowd," Bill used to tell us when we were teenagers. "The crowd lets you be brave in a way that you couldn't be brave on your own. But it will also allow you to do things—hurt women or insult people—that you would never do alone."

It was a lesson that held both wisdom and contradiction. Our father, after all, had himself been swept up in the energy and momentum of the crowd many times before; as an activist and self-proclaimed revolutionary, he still relies on the crowd, trusts its wisdom and moral authority. A crowd, in his eyes, can be the living embodiment of "the people," capable of demanding change, cowing authority, standing up to injustice, even toppling governments. But as a father, Bill also felt the need to warn his sons of its dangers—the inherent volatility of a mass of young people hanging out together, egging one another on, daring one another to do something brave, reckless, or stupid, and potentially losing their individual judgment or decency in the anonymity of the group.

This was, I realized, part of what made me feel so uncomfortable about those protests and marches my father loved. Being part of a crowd permits, even requires, a fundamental abandonment of the self: a submerging of one's personal tastes, ideas, and ego into a larger movement. There's something deeply human about that; we are, after all, a collective, tribal species, and it can be useful, even necessary, to act as a single organism, to be governed by a joint will—in moments of war and crisis, for example, or

in communal grief. But the crowd can also reveal us at our most inhumane. A crowd can quickly become a mob, capable of collective hysteria and violence. Lynchings and wartime atrocities are carried out by crowds. And when you're part of a mob, it can be difficult, even impossible, to reassert your *self*, to see when you have crossed a line—when the thrill of collective action and anonymous violence is leading you to do something, become something, you wouldn't recognize.

I could never quite reconcile my own resistance to a mass movement with my radical upbringing. Collective action, I was always taught, is necessary for social change; solidarity and community and mass protest are fundamental to the revolutionary project. But I've also always been suspicious of the crowd—not so much as a political statement, but as a fundamental piece of my character. The embarrassment I feel in a mass protest or gathering, I've come to realize, reflects a deeper alienation, something like what Groucho Marx meant when he said he wouldn't want to be part of any club that would have him as a member. Or what James Baldwin had in mind when he wrote that the artist, to fulfil his true vocation, has to cultivate "the state of being alone." I've always preferred solitude to the crowd, individual contemplation to collective action.

How was this characteristic inherited? It feels related in some way to my mother's stubbornness and fierce independence, but it also could be a reaction *against* my parents—their willingness to be swept away by a movement, to sacrifice their free will and agency, even their own morality, in the name of mass solidarity.

I admire this quality in them, but I rarely recognize it in myself. Because I think it may be necessary, at times, for people to stand and be counted in a crowd—to defend democracy or protest for social change. But I think it can also be necessary to stand outside of the crowd, to insist on individual choice and responsibility. After all, mass movements often stifle creativity and threaten the freedom of individuals. Too many revolutions have led to repressive regimes, stained by outbreaks of mass hysteria, groupthink, authoritarianism, violence, and the stupidity of the mob.

I mentioned this ambivalence to my father recently, my own contradictory feelings about the mass actions he loves, and he was happy to acknowledge his own ambivalence, a shared sense of contradiction, or what he sees as a dialectic.

“I think again and again of the civil rights actions I was involved in,” he told me. “We would gather in churches in Cleveland and Detroit, and we would sing, and we would bond, and we would be a group. And then I could go out into the street more fearless than I actually am. I’m a naturally peaceful person and I don’t relish being violent. But I also think there’s something *good* about being in the crowd, about being comrades, shoulder to shoulder with others. And I think there’s also something absolutely destructive about it.”

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Why Don’t You Die for the People?

(West Side, Chicago, 1969)

Nothing is more important than stopping fascism, because fascism will stop us all.
—Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party

Illinois Black Panther Party chairman Fred Hampton in Chicago during the Days of Rage, 1969.

In the fall of 1968, about a year before the Days of Rage riots, a white man named Nelson Suitt parked his ice cream truck next to a school playground in the Chicago suburb of Maywood, Illinois, where the familiar Good Humor jingle playing over the loudspeaker quickly drew an eager crowd of what Suitt called “40 to 50 children and teenagers, all negro.”

This was part of Suitt’s daily routine; he’d been selling ice cream at the Maywood playlot all summer long. But on this day, something unexpected happened; as Suitt barked at the kids to take out their quarters and get in line, an unfamiliar car pulled up at the corner and the kids all started cheering that they would get free ice cream now that their “leader” had arrived.

According to Suitt, a Black man got out of the car, pushed his way into the cab of the truck, and held Suitt down while the neighborhood kids rummaged through the freezer in back and ran off with a bunch of popsicles.

Acting on Suitt's 911 call, Chicago police soon arrested the man he'd identified as his assailant: Illinois Black Panther chairman Fred Hampton.

With characteristic bravado and good humor, Fred laughed off the accusation. "They're talking about giving me twenty years for an ice cream truck robbery?" he told a crowd of laughing Panthers that year. "Even though they made me a thief, they made me a Robin Hood-type thief! 710 ice cream bars? I may be big, but I can't eat 710 ice cream bars!"

But the charges were no joke—Fred was facing more than twenty years in prison.

Earlier that spring, in a secret memo authorizing the illegal COINTELPRO program aimed at surveilling and disrupting leftist organizations the government deemed "subversive," FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had mused about the danger of a potential "coalition of militant black nationalist groups . . . that might be the first step towards a real 'Mau Mau' [Kenyan anti-colonial uprising] in America," and ordered his agents to do whatever was necessary to "Prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify and electrify the militant black nationalist movement."

Hoover had once imagined that Malcolm X "might have been such a messiah," but Malcolm was now dead. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the next obvious candidate, Hoover wrote in his memo, "(should he abandon his supposed 'obedience' to 'white, liberal doctrines' (nonviolence) and embrace black nationalism)." But in 1968, following King's assassination (and just a month after Hoover's memo), Hoover and the FBI started searching for a new potential Black messiah to "neutralize."

And if there was any civil rights leader who seemed capable of realizing those fears—a still-living Malcolm? a Dr. King with a gun, who might "unify and electrify" the Black freedom struggle?—it was Chairman Fred Hampton.

That May, just two months before the alleged Good Humor truck robbery, the Bureau had designated Fred, like Bernardine before him, a "key militant" and placed him on their "agitator index." The Chicago police Red Squad opened its own file, calling Fred "a known instigator" with "an arrogant attitude" who "resents any one with authority." In an order to his

agents that month, Hoover insisted that "the Negro youth and moderate must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teaching, they will be dead revolutionaries."

That year, across the country, the simmering conflict between the Black Panther Party and law enforcement had erupted into open warfare. Party founder Huey P. Newton was already locked up in California for manslaughter in the shooting of a police officer during a traffic stop. Minister of information Eldridge Cleaver had jumped bail and fled to Cuba after a gunfight with police. And in New York, practically the entire East Coast party—the so-called Panther 21—had been rounded up and charged in an alleged plot to blow up two New York City police stations and then wait outside with long-range rifles to pick off fleeing officers, one by one.

In Chicago, on July 16, 1969, a Panther member was shot and killed in a confrontation with police. Two weeks later, police and Panthers engaged in another gunfight; the cops claimed a sniper had opened fire from inside Black Panther headquarters, but witnesses reported that police fired at the building first, unprovoked.

Fred seemed well aware of the increasingly deadly threat. "I don't believe I'm gonna die in a car wreck," he told a group of Panthers that year. "I don't believe I'm gonna die because of a bad heart. I don't believe I'm gonna die because of lung cancer. I believe I'm going to be able to die doing the thing I was born for . . . that I will die as a revolutionary in the international proletarian revolutionary struggle."

Fred's lawyer, Jeff Haas, told me that Fred was deeply conflicted that year, wrestling with what he should do next—surrender or disappear; serve his time for ice cream robbery or go on the run. "He was going to either have to go back to prison," Haas told me, "for supposedly stealing from an ice cream truck, or go underground or leave the country or something." But if he voiced these doubts in private, in public Fred still sounded ready for a fight. On October 4—after Chicago police raided Panther headquarters, dragged a few men out onto the street, and beat them bloody with the butts of shotguns—Fred was defiant. "It takes two to tango, motherfucker," he told reporters outside. "As soon as you kick that door down, I have to kick it back on you. We don't lock our doors. We just get us some good guns and leave them motherfuckers open."

On Wednesday, December 3, 1969, Fred taught his regular political education class at a local church. Class ended around 9:30 p.m., and he

invited a few friends back to the Monroe Street apartment he shared with his girlfriend, Deborah Johnson, who was more than eight months pregnant with their son. William O'Neal, the head of Fred's security detail, made them all dinner—hot dogs and Kool-Aid—and the group sat around eating and chatting until late. A little after midnight, Fred called his mom to check in. "I won't be coming home tonight," he told her. "Just keep my food on the stove."

And then he fell asleep in the middle of their call.

Fred had seemed unusually exhausted that night, but his friends chalked it up to the stress of his work and legal situation; he'd been pushing himself too hard for months. At 1:30 a.m., Deborah got Fred undressed and put him to bed while the others cleaned up dinner and headed off to their separate bedrooms. Twenty-two-year-old Mark Clark was left alone on watch in a chair facing the door, a shotgun in his lap.

Around 4:30 a.m., Mark heard a tapping at the door.

"Who is it?" he called out.

A burst of gunfire tore through his chest and knocked him back off his chair. As he fell, his shotgun went off, taking out a chunk of plaster in the ceiling. And the walls seemed to implode.

In her bedroom, Deborah started up in bed, terrified. The roar of gunfire was deafening, and she could see strobes flashing underneath the door. "The mattress is just *going*," she said later, "you could feel bullets going into it. I just know we'd be dead, everybody in there."

Deborah scrambled across the bed, screaming for Fred to get up, to run. "And Fred—he just raised his head up real slow," she said. "It was like watching a slow motion. His eyes were open. He raised his head up real slow, with his eyes toward the entranceway . . . and laid his head back down. That was the only movement he made."

Deborah screamed again. One of the Panthers in the apartment shouted: "Stop shooting! Stop shooting! We got a pregnant woman in here!"

Police kicked through the door, stormed into the apartment, and dragged Deborah out into the kitchen, throwing her up against the wall in a line of other half-dressed Panthers. But she could still hear the police back in the bedroom with Fred.

"Is he dead?" one of the cops asked out loud.

"He'll make it," another officer answered.

Deborah heard two more quick gunshots, and then a ringing silence.

“Well,” said the first, “he’s good and dead now.”

Police would later claim they were drawn into this deadly firefight—that Panthers had started shooting first, through the walls and the front door, and kept firing even after being told it was the police outside and ordered to lay down their guns. Prosecutor Ed Hanrahan described it as proof of the “extreme viciousness of the Black Panther Party.” But the investigation would later show that the cops, and Hanrahan, were lying: police had fired more than ninety bullets through the walls of the apartment. The only shot fired from inside was the single blast into the ceiling from Mark Clark’s falling shotgun.

Through all this shooting, all the screaming, Fred never woke up. An autopsy would later reveal secobarbital, a potent sedative, in his blood. William O’Neal—the Panther who mixed the Kool-Aid that night—was an FBI informant and had provided the government with a hand-drawn layout of the apartment, including the precise location of Fred Hampton’s bed.

Fred had been drugged on the orders of federal law enforcement and murdered by Chicago police.

* * *

The Weathermen read about their friend’s death in the papers the next morning, along with most of the rest of the country.

“It wasn’t the first person who was killed,” Bill told me, “but the first person *close* to us that was killed. We were young, we hadn’t experienced death a lot, and it was overwhelming.”

Bill rushed over to Fred’s apartment. It was taped off as a crime scene, but the Panthers, in defiance of police, kept the place open so witnesses could see the bullet holes punched in through the walls, the pools of blood soaked into the mattress, and the pockmarked plaster above Fred’s bed.

Fred and Deborah's bloody mattress.

"I felt like at that moment, my world turned 180 degrees," Weatherwoman Cathy Wilkerson later remembered. "I felt like, OK, it was now open warfare. This was Germany in 1939, and they were going to go around and kill all the Black leaders. I had to dedicate my life to responding to this. It didn't matter that it didn't make sense. It didn't matter that it was unpleasant. This is what I had to deal with. And if somebody said they had a way to deal with it, I would follow them."

To Fred's friends, this death felt deeply personal—and threatening; it was not just a targeted killing, but a confirmation of the government's growing appetite for lethal violence. Racist police and white vigilantes had killed Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney in Mississippi; assassinated Medgar Evers and Dr. Martin Luther King; murdered seventeen-year-old Panther Bobby Hutton in Oakland; entrapped and arrested the Panther 21 in New York. Now Chicago police had gunned down Fred Hampton in his bedroom, with his pregnant girlfriend beside him.

"I was in a rage," my mother told me, still visibly angry decades later, "at the absolute *stench* of American life."

The Weathermen all felt this kind of nihilistic anger, and a growing sense of almost fatalistic resignation. Though they were young, in their

teens and twenties, none of them now expected to live much longer. “I can remember actual moments,” Bill told me, “walking down the street and thinking, ‘We’re all going to be dead next year.’ And thinking, ‘Do I want to go through with it?’ And thinking, ‘Yes, I do.’”

Fred Hampton had become a martyr for a generation of young activists. His death convinced them that they were entering a new stage in the struggle, requiring a new level of dedication and self-sacrifice. As Fred himself put it, just a few months before his death, “If you’re asked to make a commitment at the age of twenty and you say ‘I don’t want to make that commitment because I’m too young, I want to live a little bit longer’? What you did is, you’re dead already. Why don’t you live for the people? Why don’t you struggle for the people? Why don’t you die for the people?”

The night after Fred’s death, the Weathermen offered up their first public response to his murder. The banner headline in the *Chicago Tribune* tells the story: POLICE SQUAD CAR BOMBED.

Cruisers across the city were bombed overnight in police parking lots, where plastic coffee cups filled with black powder were placed under the hoods of squad cars, “causing damage to the cars and breaking 20 to 30 windows of nearby apartment houses.”

The following day, Weathermen announced a new national “alliance” with the Black Panther Party, and urged all radical groups to join them to “intensify the struggle against oppression” in the United States.

To Bernardine, Bill, Terry, Diana, and their friends, it seemed clear now that U.S. law enforcement would stop at nothing to prevent a radical movement for racial equality, that Black freedom groups like the Panthers—and even Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolent coalition—would be harassed, intimidated, and ultimately suppressed, just as anti-colonial movements overseas were suppressed by their own authoritarian regimes with terror, violence, and outright government death squads. This meant that radical anti-racist groups in the U.S., both Black and white, faced an existential threat and a new, urgent task: to survive, they would need a clandestine space, where they could continue to organize beyond the reach of federal and local law enforcement.

The Weathermen would have to build an underground.

“We were determined not to spend another minute on trials,” Bill told me. “We didn’t want to raise money; we didn’t want to pay lawyers. So, we

said to ourselves, we have to know how to get ID. We have to figure out how to have safehouses."

That fall, Hoover sent out an emergency AirTel to his special agents across the country: "Information has been received that the 'Weatherman' faction of SDS is going underground and forming commando-type units which will engage in terroristic acts, including bombings, arsons and assassinations."

Hoover was right. The Weathermen were getting ready to go to war.

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War Council

(Flint, Michigan, 1969–70)

You know, a long time ago being crazy meant something. Nowadays everybody's crazy.
—Charles Manson

Poster for the Weatherman "War Council"—Santa Claus with dynamite, machine gun, and Zapata-style bandolier. "Over the holidays we plotted war on Amerika . . ."

Following Fred Hampton's death, the Weathermen were divided over what to do next. Some still wanted to stick to symbolic bombings—targeting police statues or empty squad cars—acts they called, with ironic understatement, "extreme vandalism." But this was now the moderate position in the group, and the moderates were being drowned out by more extreme voices.

By this point, the Weathermen had been protesting the Vietnam War for what felt like their entire lives: as high school students, college kids, and young activists. They'd marched against it, voted and campaigned against it. They'd canvassed, run sit-ins, be-ins, die-ins. They'd pursued every peaceful strategy they could imagine. Years of effort—and nothing had changed.

In fact, the war was getting worse. That November, news broke about the massacre at My Lai. American GIs had murdered more than five hundred civilians in the village of Son My, almost all of them women, children, and old men. The soldiers gang-raped and mutilated many of their victims—including kids as young as twelve—carving "C Company" into their victims' bare chests with bayonets. It was one of the worst atrocities committed by U.S. forces in the twentieth century.

"Are we going to just let another day dawn," Weatherwoman Cathy Wilkerson remembers thinking, "when we see this carnage of women and children and people and devastation to the landscape and Agent Orange burning people up? How can you not do something?"

Cathy's boyfriend, Terry, and his friend J.J., Bernardine's ex-boyfriend, were now co-leaders of the New York group, and they argued that the organization needed to level up. It wasn't enough anymore to protest, or even riot on the streets; they had to "bring the war home" for real—to fight back against racist police and the American war machine using the government's own tools: assassinations, arson attacks, even anti-personnel bombs.

At every meeting of Weatherman collectives, on every phone call, this question was posed, answered, and relitigated, over and over. Should we stick to symbolic bombings or embrace a new, more violent, "military strategy"? Finally, Bernardine called a national meeting to settle the question. It was supposed to be a chance to hear from both sides, but it was advertised as the SDS National War Council, which gives you a sense of their collective state of mind at the time.

"For people to be able to enjoy Christmas in this country?" Bernardine snarled in front of the news cameras that month. "Without taking action about a blatant *murder* that takes place in this city against a revolutionary Black leader? *Is an obscenity!*"

I asked her recently if she remembers saying that—if she recalled the visceral sense of grief and rage and disgust she felt in those early weeks

after Fred's death, and how that feeling fueled the extremism and violence to come.

"Yeah, I do," she answered right away. "We were already close to the edge, as you know. And then people going Christmas shopping downtown in Chicago? Bells ringing. Collecting money? It really drove us quite crazy. Drove me quite crazy."

* * *

Over Christmas break, Weathermen went home—to say goodbye to their families for perhaps the last time. Many were planning to go underground, to build a clandestine resistance beyond the reach of police or the FBI, to fight back against the military and law enforcement, and they knew there would be no coming back from that choice. But many of them were still uncertain when, how, or even whether to take the final, decisive step.

Bill's father, my grandpa Tom, took his son out for a steak dinner to talk. "We had a very stressful conversation," Bill told me. "He was almost in tears. And he said, 'You're on the brink of something terrible.' He didn't know we were going underground; I didn't exactly know either, but I knew we were in the sights of the FBI, and I knew—*and I knew he knew*—we were in deep trouble and could be in even deeper trouble. And he *begged* me not to take the next step."

Diana went home for Christmas, too, to visit her family at their farm in Dwight, Illinois. Her mother was upset to see how skinny she looked—Diana hadn't been eating well in the Midwest collective, barely sleeping, training to turn herself into a soldier. But she still managed to help her nanny, Ruth, cook the holiday meal. And she seemed to like her gifts: clothes from her mom, a fisherman's sweater from her sister. Her family would later describe Christmas as "pleasant." Everyone was clearly trying.

My mom went home, too, to visit Barney and Dorothy at their retirement community in Sun City, Florida. She told me she wanted to let them know "just how much I love them. I couldn't say anything because I knew they would be under pressure, and I didn't know what was going to happen next. But they were great parents. I was so lucky to have them as my parents. So, I flew to Florida, and we walked around. I ate grapefruit off their tree in the backyard. I was happy to see them happy."

The day after Christmas, Barney and Dorothy drove their daughter to the Tampa airport to say goodbye. And as she rode up the escalator, she remembers looking back over her shoulder at her parents one final time. “They were waving, and I was waving and blowing kisses,” she told me. “I was in tears. I wasn’t conflicted—I knew what I was going to do, I just didn’t want them to be hurt. Of course, they were.”

* * *

On December 27, 1969—two days after Christmas—more than a hundred young Weathermen gathered in Flint, Michigan, at a huge, dilapidated dance hall, to hold their War Council.

When they had last met, six months earlier, at the SDS convention in Chicago, the venue’s dual function as a part-time roller derby rink seemed like a poetically appropriate venue for the meeting’s undertone of performative combat. The Giant Ballroom in Flint, on the other hand, reeked of actual violence. The Weathermen who rented the place had to mop up puddles of blood from a nightclub shooting a few days earlier.

They decorated the place with posters and banners of their revolutionary heroes—Che Guevara, Malcolm X, and Eldridge Cleaver; an entire wall of alternating red and black photos of Fred Hampton. A big cardboard machine gun hanging from the ceiling pointed at pictures of their enemies: Mayor Daley, Ronald Reagan, Robert McNamara, and President Nixon.

Sleeping bags and pillows were piled up in the corners of the room—by this point, Weathermen were supposed to sleep only an hour or two a night, to dedicate themselves to the work 24/7, and the council was scheduled to go on for days.

At first, it seemed like the War Council might be just a smaller, grungier version of the SDS convention of six months earlier: people gave speeches, attended workshops, and staged criticism/self-criticism sessions. They held meetings and talked about organizing strategies. But after the escalating violence of the past year, the format was starting to feel inadequate. There was a palpable sense of uncertainty and inertia in the air.

“Time started to drag,” recalled informant Larry Grathwohl, who was at the meeting to spy on the Weathermen for his FBI handlers. “It was only the first day of the conference, but I was already bored. My wanderings came to a sudden halt when Bernardine Dohrn appeared on the stage. She stood

erect, like a high priestess waiting for her followers to quiet down. She was sexually appealing in long dark boots, a short mini skirt, and a see-through blouse with no bra . . . I moved closer."

Once again, if men like Grathwohl were drawn in by Bernardine's "sex appeal," they would often be shocked by what she had to say. As Grathwohl himself put it, "her words belied her feminine appearance."

Bernardine's speech started out as a kind of collective self-criticism, highlighting Weatherman's shared complicity as white people unwilling to go to war against anti-Black racism. "We fucked up," she told her friends. "We didn't fight around Bobby Seale when he was shackled at the [Chicago 8] conspiracy trial. We should have torn the courtroom apart! We didn't burn Chicago down when Fred [Hampton] was killed!"

And then it got really dark.

The Tate–LaBianca murders—the brutal slayings of actress Sharon Tate and four friends by cult followers of Charles Manson—had been dominating headlines since August. The killings seemed to signify an ugly shift in the zeitgeist—the hippie peace and "free love" of the 1960s curdling, by the end of the decade, into something much more sinister and violent. And that shift was apparently still fresh on Bernardine's mind:

"Dig it," she told her War Council. "First, they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them, then they even shoved a fork into a victim's stomach? Wild!"

My mom would later claim this was meant to be a dark joke—an extreme metaphor for the way the American media celebrated war and fetishized sex and violence. But it's clear to me now, after talking to her and other people who were there and looking more closely at the context, that it was less a joke than a provocation—that Bernardine invoked the Manson cult's end-times barbarism not as a cautionary tale but as a battle cry.

As Abe Peck, one of the Weathermen who saw her speak at Flint, later remembered, "There was a touch of kamikaze-ism in the air . . . It was pretty wild. The ferocity of their thinking was apparent. What you saw was people who were steeling themselves to go over the top, or over the edge—depending on your point of view."

More importantly, the "joke" about Manson overshadowed the more serious and truly radical part of Bernardine's speech: a call for warlike solidarity with Black militant groups like the Black Panther Party. She predicted "revolution in the 1970s," called on Weathermen to "overthrow

the racist America power structure," and urged an end to speechifying itself, to radical rhetoric no matter how unhinged or extreme. "We can't just stand around and talk about it!" she shouted from the stage. "We have to get into armed struggle!"

The speakers who followed were no less intense. "It's a wonderful feeling to hit a pig," mused Mark Rudd into the microphone. "It must be a really wonderful feeling to kill a pig or blow up a building."

Finally, J.J.—John Jacobs, my mom's one-time boyfriend and Terry's new partner in crime back in New York—promised a "violent war" against bourgeois morality. "We will burn and loot and destroy," he told the delirious crowd. "We are against everything that is 'good' and 'decent' in America. We are the incubation of your mother's nightmare!"

When the speeches were over, the tone got, if possible, even more Mansonesque. Someone put Sly and the Family Stone on loop over a big sound system that shook the floor. Weathermen started singing and dancing, changing the lyrics into revolutionary slogans. People high on speed, tripping on acid, started having group sex—and the Giant Ballroom devolved into a sex- and drug-fueled free-for-all.

Tom Hayden, the founder of SDS, found himself frightened and out of place. "I was feeling very bourgeois," he said later. "I was with my girlfriend. It was no place for couples. My rock foundation was the early '60s. Theirs was the mid-to-late '60s. It doesn't sound chronologically like it's much distance in time, but it's an eternity! I was becoming out of touch. I mean, these people were having flat-out naked wild orgies as a political act!"

But despite all the sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll, the energy at Flint wasn't Woodstock; it was more Moscow, 1917; Belfast, 1920; or Algiers, 1959. The rest of the War Council was dedicated to meticulous planning: how to build an underground resistance, how to source weapons, how women could hide bombs in their purses or under their dresses, like their revolutionary heroines from *The Battle of Algiers*.

The next morning, the few remaining Weathermen, groggy and hungover, stumbled out of the Giant Ballroom into the Michigan snow, having made a momentous collective decision. As the FBI put it, "[Members of the Weather Bureau] have made strategic plans to build a small, tough, paramilitary organization designed to carry out guerrilla

warfare in the cities of the United States. They are totally committed to violent revolution."

It was January 1, 1970—a dark beginning to a new decade.

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The Military Strategy

(New York, 1970)

Beware, when fighting monsters, lest you become a monster; if you gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss gazes back into you.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

The townhouse, New York, 1970.

Nine-year-old John Murtagh Jr. was pretty sure he was dreaming.

In the dream, his bed was moving up and down, as if a giant hand had roughly shaken it, then lifted it up a few feet and dropped it back down to the floor. John jolted awake, but he still wasn't sure if his heart was racing from his dream or if his bed had actually moved in real life.

Suddenly, his mom burst through the door, grabbed John Jr. from his tangle of sweaty sheets, and ran into the kitchen, where the rest of his family huddled against the front windows, frozen in terror as flames climbed up the walls outside.

"I remember standing in the kitchen with my parents," John Jr. recalled later, in a Fox News interview. "We could see flames through the window. You're stuck in a burning house, but you're not sure whether it's safe to leave!"

Two firebombs—plastic jugs of gasoline with firecrackers taped to their mouths as makeshift detonators—had exploded outside his front door, and another underneath the family car in the garage, shattering the front windows and igniting the wooden roof.

No one was hurt. Within minutes, the fire department arrived, ushered the Murtagh family outside, and extinguished the blaze. But their home in Inwood, on the northern tip of Manhattan, had become a crime scene. And as the sun rose in the morning, John Jr., his parents, siblings, and the police outside could all see the graffiti scrawled across the sidewalk in blood-red paint:

THE VIETCONG HAVE WON!
KILL THE PIGS
FREE THE PANTHER 21

John Jr.'s father—Justice John Murtagh Sr.—was the state judge then presiding over the Panther 21 trial in New York. And he and his family had just become the first civilian targets of an increasingly radicalized East Coast Weatherman cell.

After the Flint War Council, the Weathermen had split up, heading off in different directions. Bernardine and Jeff Jones, the blond California Weatherman who led the charge at the Days of Rage, drove west. Bill and Diana stayed in the Midwest to lead the Detroit collective—what was left of the Jesse James Gang. And Terry and J.J. headed east together, to New York. The network was spread out, decentralized by design—following

Che's *foco* theory of guerrilla resistance: multiple scattered cells operating autonomously, so that if one group was caught or infiltrated, it couldn't give up the others.

They were planning a spring offensive: bombs would go off simultaneously in San Francisco, Detroit, Washington, and New York, announcing a nationwide guerrilla army ready to bring the war home into every corner of white America.

Terry was, by all accounts, the most eager to get started. "I don't want you to get left behind," he pleaded with Bill that month. "In this period, the people who are capable of doing, who are really capable of armed struggle, are the ones who are going to get through. I don't want you left behind!"

Bill didn't want to be left behind, either. And the two friends raced each other to see who could strike first.

In fact, the Midwest cell—Bill and Diana's group—almost beat Terry to the finish line. That March, a young woman dressed like a secretary (as always, no one would tell me the name of a person involved in a specific action) walked into the 13th Precinct police station in Detroit and planted thirty-six sticks of dynamite in a women's restroom, using a lit cigarette for a fuse.

That much dynamite could have leveled the building, which would have been both a strategic and a moral catastrophe. I asked my father how he could have contemplated blowing up a police station, and he said that he and his friends had convinced themselves, after Fred's death, to set aside their human feelings—to try to turn themselves into efficient, emotionless machines capable of doing what they thought needed to be done. "We often said things like, 'I need to be a tool of the revolution,'" he told me. "Or, 'I need to be an instrument of the rebellion.' And that *instrumentalizing* of our lives was—more than a weakness. It was a horror."

Luckily, fatefully—for my father, my family, the rest of the movement, and especially the people in the station—the bomb didn't go off. The Weathermen's youth and inexperience saved them. The cigarette fuse burned out without igniting the dynamite, preventing a tragic, perhaps apocalyptic, ending to this story.

Weeks later, tipped off by FBI informant Larry Grathwohl, police would find two undetonated bombs—thirty-six sticks of dynamite in the police station and nine more in a narrow alleyway between the Police Officers' Association building and a Red Barn restaurant. The news went straight to

J. Edgar Hoover, who fired off an urgent bulletin to his agents warning that "a Weatherman group led by Bill Ayers . . . plans to dynamite the Detroit Police Association building."

The Midwest group, including Bill and Diana, scattered, fleeing from Detroit to Ohio, to regroup and look for a new target.

But meanwhile, the New York cell—Terry and J.J.'s group—was still on track for their own spring offensive. And they were planning something even bigger. Something worse.

The heart of one of the most crowded neighborhoods in the world might seem a strange site for an underground militant cell trying to avoid being spotted by police. But that spring, the New York Weathermen needed a place to stay, and they were short on cash. So Terry called his girlfriend, Cathy, back in Chicago, and asked for help. The Weathermen were in luck. Cathy's father, James Wilkerson, owned an elegant four-story townhouse in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, on West 11th Street; he and his new wife were going to St. Kitts in the Caribbean for spring break. Their townhouse would be empty for a few weeks.

"I told him I had the flu," Cathy later wrote, "and could I stay there a little bit while they were gone? And with great reluctance, he gave me the key to the house and said, 'Don't stay any longer than you have to.'"

That week, a neighbor watched as a group of scruffy-looking young people carried crates from the trunk of a station wagon into the townhouse. "I thought they were redecorators," he told police later. "I stopped and asked them if they'd paint a room for me. And they said they didn't do work like that."

The New York cell had managed to collect hundreds of pounds of dynamite—several crates of explosives, way more than they could use for any symbolic, or even military action, all stored in the basement of the townhouse on 11th Street. For safety.

"Being middle-class kids," Cathy admits, "we had *over-consumed*. We had all this dynamite we weren't using."

They also already had a target in mind. Fort Dix, near Trenton, New Jersey, was the largest U.S. Army base in the Northeast, and had become notorious among New York radicals for the treatment of its soldiers—Black soldiers in particular—in the base's overcrowded military stockade, which had been the scene of a major prison riot the previous year. There was an officers' dance coming up at Fort Dix. It would be easy enough for a

Weatherman—or better yet, a young Weatherwoman, dressed like a college girl meeting her officer boyfriend—to smuggle a device into the dance in her purse and plant it in a bathroom or under a chair, like their revolutionary role models in *The Battle of Algiers*.

Cathy remembers that when the new target was first brought up, "the tension in the air seemed to crystallize into a fine mist." They were now talking about using deadly force, against people their own age—kids out at a dance, listening to music with their civilian girlfriends. They all knew this was a major turning point. An extreme escalation.

But by 1970, the Weathermen were all about extremism and escalation. To the most hardcore members of the New York cell, Fort Dix had come to represent a monstrous hybrid of everything they most despised: the American war machine, the racist and violent carceral system, the impotence of mainstream protest to make any difference. Army officers, they had convinced themselves, were legitimate targets—enemy combatants, on their way to supervise a mass slaughter in Vietnam. Anyone in the cell urging caution or moderation by this point would have to admit to weakness. Ambivalence. Self-doubt. All cardinal sins in the Weather Machine, likely to lead to accusations of ignoring Black and Vietnamese suffering, to all-night struggle sessions, social ostracism, even expulsion from the group.

So, nobody argued. Nobody mentioned the possibility of civilian casualties, even though the device they were building was explicitly modeled on a military anti-personnel bomb—a dynamite core packed with roofing nails, intended to mimic the shrapnel of the "daisy cutters" then falling all over Vietnam.

"I was thinking that even if the dynamite didn't cause much damage, at least the nails would go into the lights and walls and curtains and make a mess," Cathy later wrote in her memoir. "The nails would wound people, too, and, in their suffering, perhaps they would develop more empathy for how the Vietnamese felt when the United States dropped daisy bombs . . . I didn't think about the fact that the nails might actually kill people. Of course, it took quite a bit of denial to not think about it, but denial is essential for warfare."

"Bring the War Home" had started out as a slogan. Like "Boy Wrecks Train," it was meant to be an over-the-top, intentionally provocative metaphor. But the metaphor had now taken on a life of its own, its own

momentum, its own imperative. The New York cell—and Weatherman more broadly—had come to see the slogan literally, to believe in it as dogma. And once they accepted that logic of military escalation, it was hard to know where to stop.

The U.S. was now dropping more than 2,000 tons of bombs every day on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, killing countless innocent men, women, and children—eventually leaving over a million dead. The Weathermen believed this was a genocide. And in the twisted logic of wartime escalation, they were willing to kill to stop the killing.

Bernardine visited the New York cell less than a week before the planned action, to check on the group. She was now spending most of her time with her new boyfriend, Jeff, out in California, but as Weatherman's national leader she felt it was her responsibility to travel around the country and drop in on local cells to give encouragement and advice.

She told me she had a vague sense of what was happening at the townhouse, but she didn't know the details or their target. The whole point of Che's *foco* theory, after all, was that individual cells should operate autonomously, without orders from above.

But again, denial is essential for warfare, and the truth is, Bernardine didn't want to know. She was still enraged by Fred Hampton's death and the mounting death toll in Vietnam. She didn't have the stomach to fight J.J. and Terry over tactics or get into yet another argument about whether there were still moral and ethical lines they shouldn't cross.

In retrospect, though, she wishes she had asked more questions. "I worry that I didn't stop it," she told me, when I asked her if she had any regrets about what happened. "And I worry that I should have tried."

* * *

As the local leader of the New York cell, Terry took sole responsibility for building the bomb, though he knew he was in over his head. "He was totally freaked," remembers his girlfriend, Cathy Wilkerson. "He was a poet and an artist and a creative guy. He hated anything technical. He was completely intimidated by it. He said, 'I don't like this. I don't know how to do this. I don't feel confident.' But he felt like he had to overcome all that. Because if we didn't act, we were *responsible* for the children who were going to be killed the next day in Vietnam."

Terry spent his days in the basement, alone, poring over the pages of *The Blasters' Handbook*, trying to tune out his doubts, to focus on the mission. Meanwhile, the others worked on the plan: How would they smuggle this big, heavy, dangerous device into a dance? Which of the young Weatherwomen would pack it in her purse? What if she were stopped and searched? How would she get through security? What would she do if she were questioned? When would the explosion go off?

"We were all terrified," Cathy remembers. "Anybody who's been around lethal weapons, who's not completely zoned out, knows the capability of these weapons, and none of us knew what we were doing. It was just profoundly grim. And we all had our tasks. And we were busy, busy, busy, busy."

Then, in the midst of all this intense, single-minded preparation, a new recruit showed up at the townhouse, looking to join their little group. It was Diana Oughton, my father's girlfriend.

Cathy remembers her friend being "noticeably somber" when she arrived. Others say Diana was thin almost to the point of anorexia. Everyone in the group was working themselves to exhaustion, rarely eating or sleeping in the collectives, driving themselves to the brink of burnout or breakdown. But Diana was suffering in other ways, too.

"We hadn't seen each other in a while," Bill remembered. "And our relationship had been under a lot of pressure. We were in a rough spot, and we weren't sure we were going to be together."

The situation was complicated. Weatherman's ideological opposition to monogamy meant that Bill and Diana had stopped considering themselves an exclusive couple; they were both seeing other people. That part, at least, was mutual. But Diana felt that Bill wasn't being honest with her, or himself, about his true feelings. "The thing you don't understand," she told him that spring, "the thing that's so completely crazy, is that all you have to do is admit to yourself that you really love me and want to be with me and are not embarrassed by me. If you would just admit that to yourself and to me, this whole nightmare would be over."

For Diana, the "nightmare" was their growing emotional distance, the difficulty of maintaining a loving relationship under the pressure of their increasing militancy. At the time, this felt like an unresolvable contradiction. After all, how could Bill and Diana—or anyone, really—be fully committed to a romantic relationship if they stood willing to sacrifice

their happiness, and even their lives, for their political cause? How could they be honest about their deepest feelings when they were also trying to ignore how they felt as individuals, to commit themselves to a collective, to teach themselves to be hardcore, remorseless, militant revolutionaries?

"Diana was super earnest," Bill told me, when I asked him about this complication in their relationship. "Super, super compassionate, felt things very deeply, cried easily. She was a beautiful human being. She was coming at this militancy—at this attempt at being fighters—from an alien place. It was not natural to her. We spent some really lovely time together in those months. But inevitably, invariably, the conversation turned back to, 'What are we? What is to be done? What are we going to do?' And we felt that we had to recommit to a life of opposition."

Bill and Diana decided to take a pause, to put their romance on hold, for a while. "It wasn't forever," Bill insists now. "It was for a week. When Diana and I are having this talk, we don't know where we're going to be next month. We just don't know . . . But who knows, maybe we could have, maybe we would have gotten back together."

They broke up. Bill stayed in Ohio, and Diana headed east to join up with Terry in New York. She would be a loyal soldier and go where she felt she was most needed, where she thought she could be most useful.

"Terry recruited her," Bill told me. "His argument was, 'We need more people. We need Diana, we need her wisdom, her common sense, her militancy.' And Terry very much wanted an ally, a friend, someone he was really close to. He wanted a *hostage*."

This final word choice, I think, hints at the white-hot tension suffusing the group that spring—the accusation that Terry was using Diana to force something out of his best friend. Bill and Terry had been close for many years, but they were also competitors and rivals. Terry felt Bill was being hesitant, that he wasn't truly committed to armed struggle. In Detroit, Bill had tried and failed to bring the war home. Now Terry was determined to show his friend, and the world, what *he* was capable of—to prove that one person, seemingly weak and insignificant, could still knock a train off its tracks.

And if his friend wasn't willing to join him on that path, Terry wanted Bill's girlfriend—the third member of their original trio, a founding member of the Jesse James Gang, who had been with them since the beginning—to witness his apotheosis.

* * *

March 6, 1970, was a cold spring day in New York City. Cathy's father and stepmom would be flying home from St. Kitts that night, so most Weatherpeople had been sent to stay with other collectives, at other safehouses. Only five remained at the townhouse, to finish the bomb, get the dynamite out of the basement, and clean the place up—all before Cathy's father got home.

This might seem crazy—that a group of urban guerrillas planning a violent assault against the U.S. military were scrambling like a bunch of teenagers trying to hide a kegger before Dad gets home. It is crazy. It shows how young they still were.

"I was just trying to get the sheets ironed," Cathy says, "because I didn't actually know people sent sheets to the laundry if they were in a hurry and had a lot of sheets. So, I was ironing sheets, and Terry and Diana were downstairs in the sub-basement, where there was a workbench, and they did it down there because they thought that was the safest place to do it."

Just before noon, Terry threaded a doorbell wire through a battery into a dime-store alarm clock they were using as a timer, and it completed a connection. Closed a circuit.

"There was a loud noise," Cathy remembered in an interview with my podcast producer, Ariana Gharib Lee. "And then the whole house sort of lifted up a foot or two, and then just kind of disintegrated all around me . . . I couldn't see anything because it was just solid dust and splinters. There was no floor anymore. And you couldn't see, because of the dust and the darkness. I had a hot iron in my hand, and I thought, 'Oh, I can't put it down, because it'll start a fire.' But then my next thought was, 'Well, this is a little bit beyond that.' So, I just threw the iron towards where the fireplace used to be. I called out to Terry, and obviously there was no response. I knew there was going to be no response . . . And as I was looking down into the crater, I saw the glow start of the fire. And then I knew I had about a minute to get out of the house before the whole thing went up in flames."

Cathy found her friend Kathy Boudin, who had been in the shower, and the two women staggered together out of the dark smoking rubble. Kathy was still naked. Behind them, the townhouse had disappeared—it was just a gaping hole in the line of row houses, like a missing tooth.

Neighbors brought the two women inside to wait for an ambulance, as a crowd started to gather on the street. Those neighbors turned out to be Susan Blanchard Wager, ex-wife of Hollywood star Henry Fonda, and Ann Hoffman, then married to Dustin Hoffman, who lived right next door. This was, after all, the West Village in 1970.

Kathy and Cathy were shell-shocked, bloodied, and caked in dust. Their neighbors, still assuming the explosion was an accident, left them with a maid to get cleaned up while they went outside to wait for the police. The two young Weatherwomen quickly showered and grabbed some clothes—including a pair of Susan Wager's pink patent leather boots. They rifled through the pockets of her coats and came up with a single subway token. They told the maid they were running out to the drugstore to pick up some salve for their burns, and they slipped outside.

By the time police knocked on door of the bedroom, the two women had disappeared—pushing through the crowd of rubberneckers out on the street, leaning on each other as they staggered up to Union Square, pressing close so they could push through the turnstile with the one token, and then stumbling down the stairs together. Into the underground.

Dustin Hoffman spent the morning running in and out of his own townhouse, carrying his prized collection of oil paintings to safety, March 6, 1970.

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Part 4

Underground(s)

Not till we are lost . . . not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves.
—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854

Firefighters carry human remains from the rubble of the townhouse.

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Changing Weather

(Mendocino, 1970)

When I was still a little kid, growing up in Harlem, my father took me down to the West Village every year to visit the site of the townhouse explosion on its March 6 anniversary, to pay our respects. He had been underground for many years by this point, and had grown a beard; he didn't worry too much anymore about being spotted or recognized.

The building had been rebuilt in a more modern, fragmented style, its façade jutting out into the street at a jagged angle, as if the architect meant to evoke the site's violent history. But I looked forward to seeing the townhouse every year. Compared to our crowded, noisy block in Harlem, the street had a hushed, bucolic feel, and the new owners kept a stuffed Paddington Bear in the front window of the townhouse, dressed in raincoat and galoshes. There was something sweetly whimsical about that stuffed bear looking out at us through the window as we stood in front of his house, on a sunny bright block in spring, with the sun filtering down through the trees. It was impossible to imagine anything awful happening there.

My dad would buy a bouquet of flowers at a corner bodega and set it on the stoop, and then we'd stand together for a moment of silence, listening to the birds and the traffic humming in the distance.

When I was finally old enough to ask what we were doing there—why we came to visit this seemingly random place each year—my father told me simply that some of his friends had died in this unlikely place.

"How did they die?"

"They made a mistake."

"What kind of mistake?"

"They tried to build a bomb here. To hurt people."

"Why?"

"They were angry."

“Then why were they your friends?”

“I was angry, too. We were all angry back then. About the war. About other things.”

“But you never hurt anyone.”

I stated this as a fact, not a question. But Bill was quiet for a while, always the good schoolteacher, trying to think of a way to answer my question honestly, if he could.

“Only my friends,” he said finally. “Only people I loved.”

* * *

At first, the NYPD thought the explosion must have been caused by a leaky gas main or an overloaded circuit that sparked an electrical fire. But as detectives combed through the wreckage, they came upon crates of wires and pipes. Boxes of carpenter’s nails. Blasting caps. And body parts: the mangled remains of three young people, so torn apart they had to be pieced together and identified over several days from scraps of skin, a severed finger, and finally, in the scoop of a crane excavating the rubble, “the headless body of a young woman, missing both hands and a foot and riddled with roofing nails.”

Reporters called Cathy Wilkerson’s mother to ask if the body might be her daughter’s—it was, after all, Cathy’s father’s house. Her mom begged Cathy to get in touch, to reassure her family she was safe, and so that construction crews could stop the dangerous work of digging through the ruins looking for more bodies.

“In a strained voice that vainly tried to hide sobs,” Cathy’s mother sent her fugitive daughter a message. “There is nothing else we need to know,” she told her, “except that you are safe, and nothing we need to say to you except that we love you and want desperately to help.”

Cathy never responded to her mother’s plea.

The next day, police identified the print of the severed finger and matched it to the mangled torso. Along with the corpses of two Weathermen, Ted Gold and Terry Robbins, they had recovered the body of my father’s girlfriend, Diana Oughton.

Reporters camped on the lawn of the Oughton home in Dwight, Illinois, where Diana had spent Christmas with her family just ten weeks earlier. Her father, James Oughton, came to the door in suit and tie, his hair neatly

combed, but with shadows around his eyes as if he had just woken up from—or fallen into—a nightmare.

"It's very difficult for me to see—what these young people are doing," he stammered in front of the cameras, straining to maintain his dignity and hold back his tears. "I mean, I know what they *say* they're doing—but it's difficult for me to see—this way of accomplishing these ends . . . When we tear this world apart, what kind of a world will we replace it with?"

Today, as an adult and a father myself, this strikes me as a tragically eloquent statement of paternal grief and bewilderment. The Oughtons had encouraged Diana's idealism, been proud of her choice to become an American Friends volunteer. They had sympathized with her dedication to antiwar activism even as they struggled to understand her increasingly radical politics, her single-minded determination and militancy. She was their daughter, after all, and they believed in her goodness and decency—that she and her generation would help to make a better world. Like most parents, they saw their child as the embodiment of their best hopes for the future.

But Diana had sacrificed that future—her life as a teacher, her dreams of having her own children, her family's happiness—for her vision of revolutionary change. Radicalized by war, desensitized to political violence, her vision could have destroyed countless other people, each with their own families, their own hopes and dreams. In trying to bring the war home, the New York Weathermen turned themselves into soldiers and nearly became murderers; instead, Diana and Terry and Teddy destroyed themselves—three more casualties in a war that was already killing thousands every week.

* * *

Bill got the news at a phone booth in rural Ohio. He'd been waiting for hours on the shoulder of a deserted highway, leaning on the hood of his car, throwing gravel at a line of empty Coke bottles he'd set up by the side of the road. His weekly check-in call was late.

He remembers listening to music on the radio, gazing out at a Midwest prairie landscape, endlessly flat except for a glass telephone booth on a slab of poured concrete by the side of the road.

Finally, the telephone rang and Bill grabbed for it. A woman's voice on the other end of the line—not Diana. Bernardine.

"Hello? Who's this?"

"Marion Delgado."

Bernardine hesitated a moment, and when she spoke again Bill thought something must be terribly wrong. Her voice didn't shake—it was clear and controlled, as always—but he could hear an awful hollowness underneath it now.

"They're gone," she told him. "Our friends. In New York? They're dead."

Bill doesn't remember what she said next, or whether he said anything at all; he just dropped the phone and ran for his car.

"The feeling was falling on your back and cracking your head open," he told me. "It felt like devastation itself. It felt like an atomic bomb. I just went to pieces. One minute the person is there, and the next minute gone? To know that she was so vivid, so alive, so vivacious, so strong, and then literally disappearing from the world? It was a horrifying thing to come to terms with. And frankly, I may never have come to terms with it."

Overnight, the Weathermen disappeared, scattering across the country. People burned what was left of their documents and ID, abandoned planned safehouses, ditched their cars. Some slipped across the border into Canada or Mexico. Others caught buses or trains out of town, or just started walking, hitching when they could.

Their pictures were all over the papers now. The FBI was searching for them, and nobody knew exactly who had died in the townhouse and who had made it out alive. What was supposed to be an organized, efficient process to build an underground suddenly became a frantic, disorderly scramble—to hide, to run, to get away.

Technically, Bill was still running the Midwest cell, the group that fled to Ohio after the failed Detroit police station bombing. But now his cell was disintegrating. Some of his friends ghosted him. Others called and tearfully explained that it was all too much, they were getting out. A few turned themselves in to the police. Others hid out with aboveground friends and hoped the storm would blow over. Those who could returned to their civilian lives.

But Bill felt like he had no life to go back to now; he had lost his girlfriend and his best friend in the townhouse. And he was certain he

would soon be dead, too. “Everything we were doing was unraveling,” he told me. “I don’t think I slept for a week. All of us knew we could be dead in the next month. And so we were racing forward really on speed and adrenaline, nothing else.”

“I was worried about whether he could survive it,” Weatherwoman Eleanor Stein told me, when I asked about Bill’s state of mind at the time. “I think he was overcome with guilt, especially for Diana. I think he felt that he had organized her into this line of politics, and if it weren’t for him she would still be alive.”

Finally, Bill got word through the underground network—an order from Bernardine, passed to cells across the country: *No more actions until we talk. Just get yourselves to California. And we’ll figure out what to do next.*

Bill got in his car and headed west, stopping only to fuel up at truck stops along the way, and beating his own land speed record from Ohio to Mendocino in just thirty-five hours. “I was pasty-faced with circles under my eyes, and skinny,” he told me. “Like somebody who just walked out of a fire and was both lucky to be alive and still a little dazed from the experience.”

Other Weathermen were making the same drive—in other cars and vans and motorcycles, from other cities and other cells. Eleanor Stein headed west with J.J.—they had become a couple after J.J.’s breakup with Bernardine, and had been staying at an uptown crash pad in New York when the townhouse blew up. The two of them were now practically all that was left of the East Coast group.

“We never stopped,” Eleanor says. “I’m sure we had to stop for a bathroom break, but I don’t remember stopping. It was just like two and a half days straight through, speed-rapping the whole time.”

J.J., Eleanor remembers, was still “completely bound up in Bernardine”—he wasn’t yet over their relationship. “So that was a deep part of it for him. He was super paranoid in every way, but in particular about Bernardine. And he was kind of gritting his teeth for what was going to happen next.”

Everyone was bracing for a fight. It seemed possible that one of them might make a deal with the police. Maybe Bill and J.J. and Eleanor and the others would show up in California and be met at the door by cops or federal agents. Either way, the group’s toxic political dynamics and

interpersonal jealousies promised a volatile reaction when they all gathered again.

But when they finally arrived in Mendocino, one carload at a time, staggering in from the road like war refugees, it wasn't at all what they were expecting.

* * *

Bernardine and Jeff Jones, her new boyfriend and co-leader of the California cell, had rented a big beach house for the gathering, up on the cliffs of Mendocino. "High, rocky bluffs, overlooking the ocean," Jeff remembers. "So, when you're standing out there, you feel like you're almost on a plateau. You can see the shore birds when they fly above the land. And off in the distance you have the roar of the waves."

Jeff, like most Weathermen, was an unlikely soldier—an outdoorsy California surfer type, the son of a Quaker pacifist and conscientious objector, who loved birdwatching and taking walks along the cliffs, exploring his beloved redwoods or hiking Mount Tam. For months, he and Bernardine had been living together on the West Coast, far from the manic intensity of the New York and Midwest cells. They'd been talking with old friends in the Bay Area counterculture, building their own clandestine networks, preparing to go underground—but all with a much more California pace and feel.

Eleanor remembers Jeff meeting her and J.J. as they emerged from their car with a hug and a smile. He seemed friendly and relaxed, a cowboy hat cocked over his long hair, looking, she says, "cool as a cucumber."

"We really wanted to kind of capture that Northern California, at-one-with-nature kind of spirit," Jeff told me. "Cook, take a walk, smoke a joint, chill out. We're not going to talk politics yet. We're going to talk politics, but we're not going to do it *yet*. We're just going to *be together*."

For years, the Weathermen had been relentlessly pushing one another to get tougher and more militant. Any signs of luxury or weakness had become targets for brutal gut-checks and criticism/self-criticism. They'd been living together in squalid urban flophouses, eating junk food or not eating at all, popping speed just to stay awake and keep working, protesting, organizing, fighting.

“We’d all been on the road for years,” Bernardine says. “We were eating terribly, and we were just beginning to uncover the fact that whether we slept and how we ate had to do with how we thought and how we lived. And living to live instead of living to die.”

So that was the plan, at first: spend time just remembering what it feels like to be alive. Walk on the beach; look at tide pools; sleep eleven or twelve hours instead of the usual few hours a night; grill food on the deck; listen to music; play guitar. Take some time to grieve, not only for their friends who had died but for their own younger selves. “A lot of talk at Mendocino was about people looking back at their own political histories,” Eleanor told me. “Where did you come from? How did you get here? You weren’t a gun-toting terrorist right in the door—you were a community organizer or whatever, right?”

Finally, when people were ready—after they’d had a few days to process and mourn—Bernardine and Jeff called them together for a conversation. About a dozen Weathermen gathered in the living room, with big panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean outside. Some sat cross-legged on chairs; some sprawled on couches; others lay on the floor and stared up at the ceiling, just trying not to think at all.

Kathy Boudin, who had barely made it out of the townhouse alive, showed up in Mendocino shell-shocked. Eleanor remembers her as “deeply shaken. Very quiet.” Kathy barely participated in the conversation at all.

Bill, too, seemed nearly broken by his loss, swinging violently between passive despair and suicidal fantasies of going out, like Terry and Diana, in a blaze of revolutionary violence. “I think that my sense of vulnerability, my sense of mortality, was raw and right on the edge,” he told me. “None of us thought we were going to get out of it alive.”

The whole meeting felt like that—precarious, on edge. As if they were all collectively holding onto the pin of a grenade. And no one was sure what the others were going to do next.

* * *

My mother started by explaining where she and Jeff thought they’d gone wrong. They had made a tragic mistake, she told her friends—what she and Jeff now called a “military error.” The townhouse explosion was not just a tactical fuck-up—a lack of technical sophistication or an accidental crossed

wire—but a major philosophical wrong turn. The error had been to see themselves as soldiers, willing to go to any lengths to win a war. As a result of that false metaphor, the New York cell—and the entire group—had done things, become people, their former selves wouldn't have recognized.

All that needed to change. In both a strategic and a moral shift, she and Jeff proposed that the group should disavow deadly violence going forward. So, no more attempts to level a police station or target an army officers' dance. No more anti-personnel bombs packed with roofing nails. They could still try to build an underground—still carry out symbolic acts of resistance. They weren't fully disavowing violence, or revolution, or even the use of dynamite. But they would try to make a distinction between military spectacle ("extreme vandalism" or "propaganda of the deed") and deadly violence. They could still fight the government, in other words, but they could never beat the U.S. military at its own game. They couldn't, and shouldn't, become killers.

For Bernardine, the deaths of Diana, Terry, and Teddy made real what had been abstract until then. She was still young and hadn't seen much death. The shock of losing her friends had opened her eyes to the horror of killing in general. It had forced her, almost overnight, to grow up, to see beyond her own anger and understand the very real consequences of violence directed at human beings.

But for many Weatherpeople, her new plan sounded like moderation bordering on heresy—and not everyone was ready to go along. Her ex-boyfriend J.J. spoke up first. Terry, Teddy, and Diana, he told their friends, were not just soldiers. They were martyrs. And you paid your respect to martyrs not by abandoning their principles but by carrying on their work. Building a bigger bomb. Attacking a new target.

"You're out," Bernardine told him bluntly, cutting him off before he even got started. "We're going to build an underground. But you are not going to be a part of it. Where we're going, you are not welcome."

J.J. scoffed, glancing around at the others for support. But as usual, when Bernardine made a decision for the group, it was firm and final. The Weathermen had already lost three friends. They had no stomach for more death.

"J.J. had no advocates," Mark Rudd said later. "He was a fighter, and he fought back as well as he could. But he was in the impossible situation of

having to defend what had happened, to defend his view that we should keep moving ahead in the same direction. They just chewed him up."

Right there in front of the group, Bernardine expelled her ex-boyfriend from the organization and demoted his close friends and allies, like Mark Rudd, from leadership. Others, mostly women, like Eleanor Stein, were elevated to the central Weather Bureau in their place. "That was the end of my relationship with J.J.," Eleanor told me, with grim understatement. "That's for sure."

Going forward, the group would speak with a new voice, and have a new name—to signal their turn away from deadly violence and their rejection of the macho, sexist overtones of the old group, and to foreshadow where they were heading next:

The Weather Underground.

* * *

J.J. took it all shockingly well. That night, he and Mark went out to a local dive bar—in his memoir, Mark remembers Creedence Clearwater Revival playing on the jukebox as the two old friends chatted over bar nuts and beer.

J.J. told Mark he'd always identified with the character Rubashov in Arthur Koestler's classic novel *Darkness at Noon*—the old Bolshevik who confesses to false treason charges in a Stalinist show trial and is executed by his former comrades in a grimy prison basement, out of loyalty to the party and to the revolution he once helped build.

"Someone has to take the blame," J.J. said. "Bernardine, Billy, and Jeff are right about the military error. I'm accepting my expulsion for the good of the organization."

Mark couldn't believe it; he was indignant on his friend's behalf. After all, the townhouse hadn't been J.J.'s fault—or not *only* his. "Everyone knew what was being planned," Mark reminded him. "We were all together in New York with Terry the week before the action, and nobody raised any objections."

"It doesn't matter," J.J. responded. "We have to create the *fiction* that they were always right so they can lead the organization."

The next day, J.J. got in his car, drove off, and disappeared. He wouldn't show up in this story again for another twenty-seven years.

But not everyone was as stoic or as clear-eyed as J.J. about the path forward. As the rest of the Weathermen got ready to leave Mendocino, Bill wasn't sure what to do next. Which side he was on. Or even who he wanted to be. With Diana and Terry dead, he didn't have a collective anymore. Without his collective, he had no identity.

"Shattered," Bernardine remembers. "Shattered. I mean, he wouldn't have said that, of course. He wasn't beating his breast or not getting out of bed. But he was shaken."

Bernardine was planning to leave for San Francisco with Jeff—they were now officially a couple, and de facto co-leaders of the group. But she could tell Bill was hurting. Worse, he was unreliable. As the organization's leader, she felt responsible for getting him through this—and preparing him for what was coming next. So, the bond developing between my parents wasn't romantic at first—it was more like the connection of a general to her troops. Bernardine felt she needed to keep Bill close. To take care of him. And lend him some of her strength.

"Maybe I just knew him best at that time," she told me. "That's why we had him come live with us, because we felt like he just needed to be fed and rocked on the waves of the Bay—and take a deep breath."

So Bernardine took Bill along to live with her and Jeff on their houseboat in Sausalito. And things started to look up, for a while. After the darkness of Flint and the townhouse, the first few years in the underground would wind up being some of the weirdest, wildest, and most fun parts of my parents' story.

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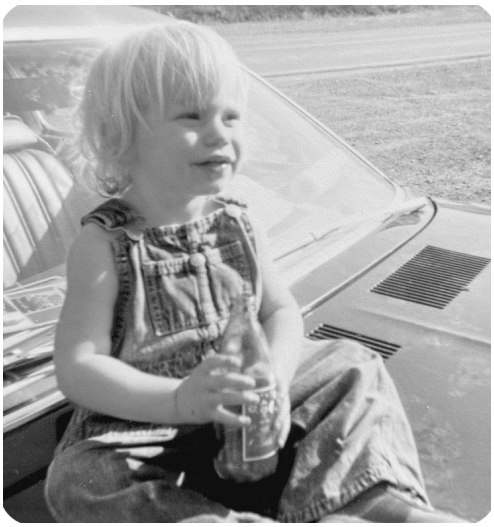
Rose and Tony and Z

(Off the Grid, 1979)

You create the realities you inhabit.
—Timothy Leary, *The Intelligence Agents*, 1979



Me on the road, underground, c. 1979–80.

When I was a little kid, driving across the country with my parents, living in disguises and under assumed names, I imagined the underground as a physical place—as if you might find it in the *Rand McNally Road Atlas*, with its own two-page spread mapping the safehouses and communes and meet-up spots, a whole secret, subterranean geography visible only once you turned the page and looked underneath.

But it wasn't a place, really. My father used to say that going underground is just a state of mind.

"I went underground by changing my name," he told me simply. "One day I was one thing, and the next day I was another thing."

Finding a new name was surprisingly easy. Weathermen would drive out to rural areas in Wisconsin, Minnesota, or North Dakota and walk around a county graveyard until they found the headstone of a person born, like them, in the early-to-mid-1940s, who'd died as an infant or toddler. They'd write down the dead kid's name, then head over to the county courthouse to apply for a replacement birth certificate. The county clerk would usually hand over the certificate without much fuss, since the Weatherperson was the right age and could supply a birthdate and hometown. Then they would use that document to apply for supplemental ID: fishing licenses, hunting licenses, library cards, baptismal certificates. Finally, they'd take all the paperwork to the DMV and apply for a driver's license under the new name. And this wasn't a fake. It was an actual license that would stand up to scrutiny at a traffic stop and could be used to rent cars, lease apartments, and build a whole new life.

Bill grew his beard out. Jeff dyed his hair black. Bernardine cut her hair short, colored it red, and started dressing like a California hippie—big glasses and hats and flowing fabrics, rather than her trademark leather jackets and knee-high boots.

Of course, they still needed a way to make money; even revolutionaries need to eat. There was an aboveground support network that sometimes helped: sympathetic friends who donated money to the underground, including, according to Jeff, the rock band Jefferson Airplane (whose lyrics inspired the title of this book), along with other musicians and movie stars from the counterculture scene. Weatherpeople would also find jobs in restaurants or construction sites, as longshoremen, proofreaders, and printers. Women did part-time secretarial work or found gigs as nannies or babysitters—jobs that paid in cash, that didn't require a Social Security card or a tax filing. They had figured out early on that the FBI was focused on only a few things: car registrations, apartment leases, utility bills—documents that could be labeled and archived and would therefore show up in a government database.

FBI agents weren't out in the streets like in a TV show, pounding the pavement looking for bad guys. They were mostly sitting behind desks, trawling through files, creating reams of reports and spreadsheets. The feds relied on the fact that people always needed money, cars, and places to stay—that they would eventually get desperate, or hungry, or just plain lonely. A wanted man would call up an ex-girlfriend just to say hi. Another would

try to withdraw cash from an old bank account, or would have to buy or sell his car. Another would try to get a job. And just like that, he would pop up on the grid, suddenly visible again.

This meant that if you could avoid being documented—keep your name off government ID, bank statements, telephone records, and tax returns—and avoid prior acquaintances and family members, you could remain more or less invisible to the FBI.

Weathermen paid for everything in cash; they made calls from payphones. They set up safehouses—cheap apartments in working-class neighborhoods rented month-to-month, without a lease. And mostly, with a few terrifying, shattering exceptions, they stayed invisible to the agents and police hunting for them. They simply disappeared.

* * *

In the late 1970s, Bill took a job as a longshoreman on the San Francisco Bay docks, loading containers on and off the huge cargo ships coming in from Europe and Asia. By this point, my parents had been underground for almost seven years. I was two years old, and we lived in the Basque Hotel—an old bed and breakfast near the Embarcadero, with a family-style restaurant on the first floor, tiny efficiency apartments upstairs, and an old-fashioned art nouveau neon sign hanging out front.

One morning, Bill went off to work as usual, dressed in his denim overalls, carrying a metal lunch pail. But as he walked into the shipyard that day, he felt a tingling spidey sense, a sweaty prickling down his back—a trained instinct for danger telling him that something was very wrong. His eyes sharpened by fear and adrenaline, Bill could see men perched on rooftops, watching the docks, and a few more, in cheap suits and shoes, loitering by the union hall. He glanced over his shoulder at his car, but he was already inside the gates. Too far to run.

Shit, he thought. *I'm busted.*

Suddenly there were men all around him, in uniform and plainclothes, waving their guns, swarming the docks from every direction. Bill could hear his co-workers calling out—*La Migra! La Migra!*—as they scattered like a flock of birds. It only took a few minutes; the feds rounded them all up, chasing them to the edge of the water or just tackling them down to the concrete of the parking lot. And they let all the white people go.

It turned out they weren't looking for Bill after all. The INS (the agency that has now become ICE) had no idea that a federal fugitive was hiding out on the docks, getting paid under a fake name. They were just rounding up undocumented workers. A run-of-the-mill, everyday immigration raid. They didn't even bother to check my father's ID.

Bill walked away that day shaken, but gifted, he says, with a new level of insight—aware of a strange and unfamiliar reality. He had always assumed, with the self-centered paranoia of a federal fugitive, that he was the only outlaw hiding out on the docks, paid off the books, desperate not to be seen or recognized. But it turned out that half the men on his crew were invisible, even to him. They were all living on a different plane, off the grid. Undocumented. Underground.

And this, it turns out, is one of the great secrets and insights of the underground—the fact that there's not one underground, but many. Over the years, my parents crossed paths with multiple subcultures of fugitives: pot growers on communes in Oregon, a cell of the Irish Republican Army working out of New York, an international underground of *palenques* stretching from Cuba to Algiers, the Jane Collective abortion network, drug smugglers, acid gurus, and members of East Coast organized crime syndicates. All these different people and organizations, each with a different agenda, a different worldview, and just one thing in common: they were all trying not to get caught.

Many people now think there's something old-fashioned and quaint about the idea of an underground. Friends have told me that our fugitive lives would obviously be impossible to pull off today, with cellphones, social media, and ever-present CCTV cameras and NSA data collection technology. But this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the underground. People think it couldn't exist today only because "underground" is another word for what escapes notice, for what cannot be seen or traced.

There was, after all, an Underground Railroad during a time of strict racial classification and chattel slavery; there was an underground resistance in Nazi Germany, inside Stalin's gulags, and in apartheid South Africa. There is an underground today, literally, in Gaza and the occupied territories. China has multiple undergrounds: journalists, democracy activists, and Falun Gong dissidents. Even the dystopian surveillance state of North Korea has its smugglers and defectors and foreign spies. In America and Europe, there are hacker undergrounds and drug

undergrounds. There's an underground of undocumented immigrants and of abortion activists smuggling pills across the Mexican border, and another based on crypto and the "dark web."

Timothy McVeigh, who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City, was part of an underground. So, in their own ways, were Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, Reality Winner, and many people whose names we don't know because they haven't yet surfaced, gone public, or been caught.

The underground, in other words, is not confined to a certain politics or morality. There are undergrounds on the left and the right, "good" and "bad" undergrounds. The underground is simply a manifestation of what exists on the fringes, hiding out in plain sight, just beneath the surface of the everyday world.

"There are so many undergrounds," Bill told me. "People say, 'Well, you couldn't do it today.' *Open your eyes.* There are hundreds of thousands and millions of people living underground in some aspect. And that was true then. And it's true now."

It's true. Adjust your state of mind. Try to imagine who might be hiding right next to you, just below the surface of your world. The underground might be closer than you think.

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We Are Outlaws, We Are Free!

(Sausalito, 1970)

I envy you. You North Americans are very lucky. You are fighting the most important fight of all —you live in the heart of the beast.

—Ernesto “Che” Guevara

INTERSTATE FLIGHT - MOB ACTION; RIOT; CONSPIRACY
WANTED BY FBI
The persons shown here are active members of the militant Weatherman faction of the Students for a Democratic Society - SDS.
Federal warrants have been issued at Chicago, Illinois, concerning these individuals, charging them with a variety of Federal violations including interstate flight to avoid prosecution, mob action, Antiriot Laws and conspiracy. Some of these individuals were also charged in an indictment returned 7/23/70, at Detroit, Michigan, with conspiracy to violate Federal Bombing and Gun Control Laws.
These individuals should be considered dangerous because of their known advocacy and use of explosives, reported acquisition of firearms and incendiary devices, and known propensity for violence.
If you have information concerning these persons please contact your local FBI Office.
Naomi Esther Jaffe
Jeffrey Carl Jones
David Benjamin Kleffer
Howard N. Machtinger
William Charles Ayers
Kathie Boudin
Judith Alice Clark
Bernardine Rae Dohrn
Celeste M. McCullough
Wendy Jane Packer
Robert Henry Roth
Mark William Rudd
Ronald D. Fliegelman
John Allen Fuerst
Leonard Handelsman
John Gregory Jacobs
Michael Louis Spiegel
Caroline M. Tanner
Lawrence Michael Weiss
Cathlyn P. Wilkerson

FBI Wanted poster for “active members of the militant Weatherman faction of the Students for a Democratic Society,” 1970.

Follow for extended description of Figure

In May 1970, Bernardine and a few close friends gathered in a safehouse in San Francisco to deliver a message to the world. Sun filtered in through the curtains—it was a beautiful day outside—as Bernardine took a deep breath and nodded to the others. Someone pressed the big red button on a tape recorder on the table, and the spools started to turn.

“Hello,” she said into the microphone. “This is Bernardine Dohrn. I’m going to read a Declaration of a State of War.”

This might seem strange—for Bernardine to “declare war” just weeks after she and Jeff had pulled the group back from their “military strategy.” But again, renouncing *deadly* violence did not mean she was embracing *non*violence. It certainly didn’t mean giving up on the revolution.

On the tape, my mother’s voice sounds uncharacteristically breathless and shaky, almost a bit scared. After the deaths of her friends in the townhouse, she must have sensed the stakes of what she was about to do.

“All over the world,” she continued, “people fighting American imperialism look to America’s youth to use our strategic position behind enemy lines to join forces in the destruction of the empire. Black people have been fighting almost alone for years. We’ve known that our job is to lead white kids into armed revolution.” And she ended with a promise of more attacks to come:

> Within the next fourteen days we will attack a symbol or institution of American injustice.
>
> This is the way we celebrate the example of Eldridge Cleaver and H. Rap Brown and all Black revolutionaries who first inspired us by their fight behind enemy lines for the liberation of their people.
>
> Never again will they fight alone.

The tape was delivered to newspapers and media outlets across the country; Los Angeles radio station KPFK received a copy via an anonymous phone call directing them to a cassette tape hidden in a public phone booth. DJs played the tape live on air, and it immediately set off a near-panic at the highest levels of government.

President Nixon called an emergency Oval Office meeting with his intelligence chiefs to stress “the magnitude of the internal security problem we face—certainly hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Americans—mostly under 30—are determined to destroy our society. I do not intend to sit idly by while self-appointed revolutionaries commit acts of terrorism throughout the land.”

Two weeks later, on June 9, an operator in New York City picked up a call from a public phone booth. “There’s a bomb in police headquarters,” a man’s voice told her. “It will go off in a few minutes.” It seemed like a prank—but the building was evacuated, with all the grudging enthusiasm of a middle school fire drill.

It was no prank. Minutes later, a huge explosion ripped through a women's restroom on the second floor, tearing huge holes in the ceiling and floor, blowing through an elevator shaft, crushing three-foot-thick cinderblock walls on both sides, and shattering windows up and down the block.

No one was killed or seriously injured in the attack; the warning, as intended, had prevented casualties. The next day, the AP received a letter—a claim of responsibility, along with a new threat:

> **Communiqué #2**
> Tonight, at 7 P.M., we blew up the N.Y.C. police headquarters. We called in a warning before the explosion.
>
> The pigs try to look invulnerable, but we keep finding their weaknesses. They guard their buildings and we walk right past their guards. They look for us—we get to them first.
>
> —The Weather Underground

All through that summer and fall, the Weather Underground carried out a series of high-profile attacks, targeting the U.S. Army base in the Presidio of San Francisco, the Bank of America building in New York, courthouses in Marin County and Queens, and the Harvard Center for International Affairs. There were no fatalities; the explosions went off in the middle of the night, in near-empty buildings, always preceded by a warning call. The bombs were intended not to kill but to attract attention to the cause, to become the focus of breathless news coverage on radio and TV, a strategy well-suited to the twentieth century's emerging "Society of the Spectacle."

No one would tell me who planted these bombs or who built them; those details are still protected by the underground's code of secrecy. But people were happy to tell me the basic method they used: a young white woman dressed as a secretary would walk into a building carrying her purse, place a device in a secluded spot (usually an empty restroom or office), set the timer, and walk out again. A few hours later, someone would call in a warning; a few minutes after that, the bomb would explode.

The tactics were simple, but it was precisely this simplicity—the ease with which Weathermen, and especially Weatherwomen, could walk undetected through the halls of government—that made these attacks seem uniquely dangerous to those in power. As Nixon's special aide for internal security issues wrote in an urgent memo to his boss that spring: "I want to go out on a limb and warn with deadly seriousness that the threat is terribly great. You should be aware that the most logical target for these people is

the President and the White House . . . Ask yourself how difficult it would be for a 23-year-old beauty to place her handbag with 5 sticks of dynamite in the ladies' room in the Residence while going through on a White House tour?"

For the president and his men, this all felt deeply personal and close to home. "Our people," Nixon mused in his official Presidential Talking Papers, "perhaps as a reaction to the excesses of the McCarthy era, are unwilling to admit the possibility that 'their children' could wish to destroy their country."

This was, in fact, precisely the message the Weather Underground wished to send: that America's own children had turned against their country, had opened up a new front, here at home, and there was nothing the government could do to stop them. "We are not just attacking targets," Bernardine taunted authorities that fall. "We are bringing a pitiful, helpless giant to its knees. Guard your planes. Guard your banks. Guard your children. Guard your doors."

FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover was apoplectic. "Terroristic violence surrounds us and more is threatened," he wrote to his field agents across the country. "Bombings, assassinations of police officers, kidnapping and murder are all part of the picture. Fanatics are at large who are at war with the Government and the American people." That fall, he declared Bernardine "The Most Dangerous Woman in America," and on October 14, 1970, she became only the fourth woman in history to make the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list.

It backfired—spectacularly. The next morning, dozens of new bomb threats lit up switchboards across the country. Airports, hospitals, and subway stations had to be evacuated, and the Pentagon ordered 24/7 National Guard patrols of all federal buildings.

These new threats didn't come from the Weather Underground; they were mostly cranks and copycats, or the inventions of overzealous law enforcement officials. But it was impossible now for authorities to distinguish "real" Weather threats from their imitators, or to separate their own fears and imaginings from the wider revolutionary zeitgeist. By making them public enemies, in other words, Nixon and Hoover had turned Bernardine and her friends into populist outlaws. The Ten Most Wanted list—not just Bernardine, but fellow Most Wanted fugitives like H. Rap Brown and Angela Davis—quickly became a who's who of radical chic.

Police reported that young people had started handing out Weatherman leaflets on the streets of New York and the Haight-Ashbury: “On the front were pictures of two white youths, a long-haired girl and a bushy-haired boy, both carrying automatic weapons. ‘Join the Americong,’ the leaflet read. ‘Be an outlaw. The time is right for fighting in the streets!’”

When folk singer Phil Ochs played Carnegie Hall and a bomb threat interrupted his show, Ochs, a leftist radical himself, seemed less afraid than delighted. “Dustin Hoffman was scared?” he scoffed to his crowd. “Bullshit! Weatherman call up with a bomb threat? If they bombed this concert I wouldn’t object! Bomb my concert!”

That summer, Bernardine’s picture and related Weather iconography started appearing in graffiti and at rock concerts and youth “happenings” across the country. Alternative weeklies reprinted her mugshot on their back pages with an added message—

BERNARDINE DOHRN WELCOME HERE!

—and kids hung them in their windows and on their walls, like Banksy prints or dorm room posters of Che or Malcolm X or Tupac Shakur. Not necessarily a sign of political sympathy or a coherent ideology, but more an ambient, impressionistic display of youth rebellion.

As SDS founder Tom Hayden put it, the Weathermen “were not the conscience of their generation, but more like its id.”

* * *

Bernardine wasn’t thinking about any of this; out west in San Francisco, she was just trying to survive. Her Wanted poster declared that she “MAY HAVE ACQUIRED FIREARMS. CONSIDERED DANGEROUS,” and she was convinced that if she were spotted by police, they would shoot to kill.

A few weeks after she was added to the Most Wanted list, she and Jeff went to pick up some much-needed cash being wired to them from an aboveground friend in Chicago. Bernardine stayed in the truck to avoid attention, idling at the curb, wearing big sunglasses to cover her face, while Jeff walked into the Western Union office on Market Street alone. As she sat there waiting, Bernardine noticed a man loitering in the doorway of a vintage clothing store nearby, smoking a cigarette. Something about this guy—his posture or the way he moved—put her on edge. She thought at

first that she was being paranoid—she hadn't been underground long enough to trust her instincts—but then she noticed another man in the rearview mirror, glancing at the license plate on the truck.

She wanted to run, to hit the gas and take off, but she couldn't leave Jeff behind. They had no cell phones. No way to get in touch or send a warning. So she took a deep breath, gritted her teeth, and waited it out.

Inside the Western Union office, Jeff was getting his own weird vibe; some guys in line seemed to be eyeing him. "There was a way in which they were just kind of leaning against the wall looking people over that pushed the button for me," he told me. "This just doesn't look right."

But he needed the money so he tried to play it cool, waiting his turn, inching forward in line. Finally, he got to the counter, gave his fake name and got the envelope of cash (about $700), stuffed it in his jeans, and headed back outside.

As soon as he got in the truck, Bernardine shifted into drive. "Sure enough," Jeff says, "a car behind us turned around and started following us down the street."

"Something weird's going on," he said. Bernardine nodded, and as she pulled up to a stoplight, the car behind them pulled up alongside. In the front seat were two men who looked kind of like hippies. *Kind of.*

"They really did look like two cops dressed up like hippies," my mom laughs now. "They leaned forward and gave us the peace sign. Everything about that was corny and ridiculous. But they definitely did get a good look at both of us. And we were like, *shit*."

She waited until the light turned green, started across the intersection, then suddenly yanked the steering wheel hard to the left, hung a U-turn, and hit the gas. The two "hippies" were trapped going forward, stuck in traffic. The Weather leaders got a head start, turned into a side street, and were able to disappear.

They met up with friends that night at the Yet Wah Chinese restaurant on Clement Street and soon abandoned the city altogether, figuring that their cars and safehouses in San Francisco had been burned. They would later find out that the feds had been tipped off about the Western Union transfer by a familiar snitch: William O'Neal—the FBI informant who drugged Fred Hampton's Kool-Aid—had been with Jeff's friend at the Western Union office in Chicago. The whole thing was a setup, and Jeff and Bernardine had nearly walked into a government trap.

But the FBI got greedy; instead of busting Jeff in the Western Union office, they decided to follow him outside in order to track down Bernardine. And just as they laid eyes on her, she managed to slip through their fingers.

* * *

Leads poured in. Over the next few months, according to newly released FBI files, Bernardine was spotted at least sixty-eight times—at a bus stop in Bloomington, Illinois, "wearing white jeans cut off knee length, very ragged and frayed, and wearing large round yellow mod glasses"; at a motel in Shreveport, Louisiana, driving a 1966 Cadillac; and camping in a Volkswagen Bug at the Kampgrounds of America in Del Rio, Texas. She was seen on a sloop docked at Pillar Point Harbor in El Granada, and in the company of a "negro male" with a "slight limp" in the lobby of the Crocket Hotel in San Antonio, where she and her apparent pimp (?) had to be thrown out of the hotel for causing a drunken scene.

A witness claimed Bernardine had dyed her hair blond and was working part-time at the Princess Beauty Supply Co. in San Antonio, Texas; another caught sight of her at the Beirut airport getting off a flight from Cairo. And a police officer from Corpus Christi was certain he'd seen Bernardine, with two "shirtless men in sandals," trying to buy narcotics in Matamoros, Mexico. The FBI was even briefly distracted by what they called a "double"—another woman in the antiwar movement who looked a bit like Bernardine, with long straight dark hair and sunglasses—and they chased down dozens of leads before realizing this was just another dead end.

She seemed to be everywhere and nowhere; she haunted the national psyche. Years before Patty Hearst burst onto the scene, and months after Diana Oughton's death in the townhouse, Bernardine had become the foremost icon of a widespread cultural anxiety: the well-bred, pretty white girl turned violently against her own parents—a potent symbol of a painful and inexplicable generational break. She had become, to borrow J.J.'s memorable phrase from the Flint War Council, "the incubation of your mother's nightmare."

The Associated Press went down to Florida to interview Barney and Dorothy—to speak directly to the traditional parents who were such a crucial piece of this symbolic resonance—and found exactly what they

were looking for: a nice, white, retired couple whose "life has been filled with parental suffering." "We can't talk about it," sniffed my grandma Dorothy ("a soft-spoken strawberry blonde"). "It tortures us. We haven't heard from Bernardine since March—two days before she dropped out of sight. I think she hasn't gotten in touch with us because she loves us and doesn't want to involve us."

The AP asked Barney and Dorothy to tell their daughter's story, to "educate the public with regard to where they 'went wrong,'" but my grandparents, still loyal to their daughter, "declined to furnish any such information."

A few days later, the FBI turned up on their doorstep, too—hoping Barney and Dorothy might be willing to cooperate with the government, if only to ensure their daughter's safety. Dorothy made the agents chocolate chip cookies and invited them into her kitchen. They sat around talking, the FBI men commiserating about their own college-age kids. Barney confided he was so worried about his daughter that he had developed a pinched nerve in his back and could barely get out of bed. He said he and Dorothy were trying to act "as if [Bernardine] never existed" because "if they did not, they would worry themselves sick . . . and end up with some type of depression or breakdown."

Barney and Dorothy didn't provide any useful intel, and the FBI soon gave up playing good cop. Agents would show up at my grandparents' house in the middle of the night, pound on the door, and roust Barney out of bed. "Don't tell your wife," they'd mutter. "Get in the car. We have your daughter's body."

Barney would pull on slippers and a jacket over his pajamas and anxiously follow them to a morgue, where they'd show off the decomposing body of a woman about his daughter's age, laid out on a slab. It wasn't her, but it was still terrifying—and this happened over and over, at least five different times. The goal was clear: if Barney and Dorothy were sufficiently convinced their daughter would be hurt or killed if she stayed a fugitive, they might decide to help the FBI catch her.

Ultimately, though, my grandparents declined to cooperate with the Bureau. Despite their unhappiness and deep disapproval of her choices, their loyalty to their daughter came first. When pressed by FBI agents, my grandma Dorothy admitted that if it came to choosing between her

government and her child, she "was unable to state what [her] degree of cooperation with the FBI might be."

"We just want to be left alone," she told them.

To the FBI, this must have felt like a primal betrayal. Hoover and most of his G-men were, like Barney Dohrn himself, American patriots—middle-aged working-class white guys who were also fathers and grandfathers. They felt as if their own kids and grandkids had turned against their values; it seemed the younger generation might be sympathetic to, even complicit with, un-American terrorists tearing down the country their fathers had made for them.

Agents became obsessed with tracking Bernardine down. They pulled her phone records, vehicle registrations, and medical files, put stops on her bank accounts and credit cards, set up electronic and direct surveillance on family members and friends. They bugged her lawyer's office, talked to her landlord, life insurance agent, postman, high school classmates, former boyfriends, and even the gynecologist who had prescribed her first birth control pills. Her FBI file notes that her last "pap smear indicated that the patient was normal."

Still, they came up empty. "Family, friends and former associates of subject furnish no information regarding current whereabouts of subject," FBI agents reported with mounting frustration in the fall of 1970.

Why couldn't they catch her? The Bureau obsessed over the possibilities. After all, this wasn't some master spy or career criminal, but a twenty-eight-year-old Midwestern law school graduate. How could she continue to evade an all-out nationwide manhunt?

Searching for clues, the Bureau tried to send undercover agents to infiltrate the underground, but most special agents of the time were 1950s-era G-men: clean-cut, drug-free, ex-military types, and they were easily spotted. Finally, the FBI's deputy director Mark Felt decided to form a special squad: Vietnam vets and FBI agents with known alcohol and drug abuse problems, who might appear more "authentic" in the counterculture demimonde.

It didn't work. In Harlem or the Haight-Ashbury, Felt's team of fake hippies and faux-Black radicals, in their bell bottoms, suede vests, and afros, stuck out like plaid on paisley. Weathermen and fellow travelers took to mockingly calling these undercover agents the Freak Squad.

"Once they went underground, they became virtually infiltration-proof," a frustrated FBI official admitted in 1970. "They're like fish swimming in a sea of sympathizers. [Even] students who don't approve of their violence will still protect them."

And this, finally, gets to the real reason the government had so much trouble finding Bernardine and her friends. It wasn't sophisticated spycraft or criminal know-how, and it wasn't because the Weathermen had help from foreign governments—Nixon's paranoid fantasies of links to international spies were overblown. The Weathermen were able to elude the FBI manhunt simply because they blended in easily with the radicalized and disaffected youth culture of the time.

"Che taught us that 'revolutionaries move like fish in the sea,'" Bernardine wrote in a public communiqué that year. "The alienation and contempt that young people have for this country has created the ocean for this revolution."

Weatherpeople, in other words, were mostly long-haired, pot-smoking, free-loving, anti-authority kids in their teens and twenties. And they gave public voice to two very simple and popular ideas: end racism; stop the war. Even young people who didn't support their tactics were broadly sympathetic with those goals.

* * *

Being counterculture heroes could, however, make for strange bedfellows. That fall, as Bernardine's outlaw reputation grew, and as the FBI made the Weather Underground the most well-known radical group in the country, they received an urgent message from a separate, parallel underground—a cult of hippie drug smugglers in Laguna Beach with the incredible name the Brotherhood of Eternal Love.

The Brotherhood—also known as "the hippie mafia"—was a bunch of California surfers who had had their minds blown by their first LSD trips in 1965, incorporated as an official religion, and set out to change the world one tab of "orange sunshine" at a time, ultimately becoming one of the largest international drug cartels in the world. Their hero and role model, acid guru Timothy Leary, had just been sentenced to twenty years in prison for possession of two joints—an early test case in the government's War on Drugs. The Brotherhood, flush with cash from the sale of hashish and LSD,

was looking for a group of counterculture operatives capable of pulling off a dramatic prison break—a perfect job, they thought, for the Weather Underground.

Bernardine was ambivalent. In her background and experience she was still a law student, not a criminal mastermind; she didn't know anything about how to break a person out of prison, and she wasn't particularly keen on Leary himself. "It wasn't our slice of the counterculture pie at all," she told me. "He didn't appeal to me at all. Because he was, I don't know, a white man? Self-centered. Rich." But the Weather Underground needed money—and the Brotherhood was offering to pay, in cash, funds that could help support the revolution. As Bill told me, they "could bankroll us learning a whole new set of skills that we could deploy elsewhere." And the more she thought about it, the more my mom convinced herself that this might be a useful experience.

"Of the twenty things that we wanted to do," she told me, "one of them was get people out of prison. Mainly African American people who were in prison for long sentences. So this seemed like it would be practice for the next and the next. So we talked ourselves into it."

It was decided. For a brown paper bag stuffed with $25,000 in unmarked bills (the equivalent of about $200,000 today) the Weather Underground would break Timothy Leary out of prison.

* * *

September 12, 1970, was a moonlit night in San Luis Obispo, California, a coastal town halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. As the fog rolled in from the Pacific, the already gray campus of the California Men's Colony West became so murky you could barely see the ground.

Leary was prepared. Using directions smuggled in through a radical lawyer, the forty-five-year-old had spent the last few months getting in shape—doing push-ups and pull-ups in the prison gym, lifting weights, memorizing maps.

Around 9 p.m., the guards changed shifts, and Leary shimmied up a lone telephone pole, wrapped his legs around the cable, and pulled himself hand over hand more than 200 agonizing feet across the prison grounds, until he was safe outside the razor-wire fence and could drop down to the grass.

The Weathermen had left a Buddha statue near the fence as a signpost—an inside joke about Leary's love of Eastern religion—so once he found the Buddha, *he knew he was on the right path*. He cut west to the highway, where a 1964 Dodge pickup hitched to a camper was waiting, with a patriotic bumper sticker on the back, a canoe on the roof, and a team of Weatherpeople inside, dressed like a group of friends on a fishing trip. They quickly cut and dyed Leary's hair, changed his clothes, and handed off his prison blues to another team, who ditched the bundle in a gas station restroom two miles south on Highway 101. A few hours later, when Leary's clothes were discovered, police figured he must be headed for Mexico and set up a series of roadblocks on the way to the border.

But this was planned misdirection—the camper carrying Leary was heading north, up California 1, the so-called "hippie highway," toward Big Sur and Mendocino. Into the underground.

> **Communiqué #4 From The Weatherman Underground**
> The Weatherman Underground has had the honor and pleasure of helping Dr. Timothy Leary escape from the POW camp at San Luis Obispo, California.
>
> Dr. Leary was being held against his will and against the will of millions of kids in this country. He was a political prisoner, captured for the work he did in helping all of us begin the task of creating a new culture.
>
> With Rap Brown and Angela Davis, with all black and brown revolutionaries, our organization commits itself to the task of freeing these prisoners of war.
>
> We are outlaws, we are free!
>
> Bernardine Dohrn

My parents met up with Leary in Northern California, among the redwood trees of the Avenue of the Giants. "He was fun," my mom told me. "It was fun. I mean, we're standing there in a redwood grove in California, and there's all these headlines about him being gone and missing."

"He has a smile that takes up his whole face," Bill added. "And he couldn't have been happier. He felt overjoyed to be out of prison. And we spent a couple of hours having a meal and congratulating one another, and then off he went."

Weathermen gave Leary a new set of clothes and a passport and put him on a plane to Paris, where he caught the next flight to Algeria—a country with no extradition treaty, safely beyond the reach of U.S. law enforcement.

And who was there to greet him?

Black Panther minister of information Eldridge Cleaver, who just a year earlier had praised the Weathermen for the Days of Rage riots, was now

living as a guest of the Algerian government, having fled the U.S. after his shootout with police. After their recent war of independence from France, the Algerians had declared their capital city “the headquarters of world revolution,” and allowed dozens of international groups to set up shop in Algiers, even giving Eldridge and his international wing of the Black Panther Party its own diplomatic compound in a two-story villa in the suburb of El Biar.

And this is another good example of the overlapping undergrounds of the 1970s: the Weathermen needed help hiding Leary beyond the reach of U.S. law enforcement, and the international wing of the Black Panther Party was happy to oblige.

On October 22—Leary’s fiftieth birthday—he and Cleaver held a joint press conference with Bernardine’s younger sister, Jennifer, who had followed her sister’s footsteps to the University of Chicago, become radicalized herself, and was now acting as an aboveground spokeswoman for the Weather Underground. And these three representatives of the American youth counterculture—Panther, Weatherwoman, and acid guru—all seemed giddy about the way things had gone down.

Cleaver praised his “white, radical Mother Country brothers and sisters” as “hijackers and ex-cons and revolutionary warriors in exile, who mean to set fire to Babylon!” while Leary beamed and babbled alongside him: “I escaped with the help of the Weathermen underground! Twenty-five of their crack underground operators came to California for my escape. They’re beautiful young people. They’re every place. They’re long-haired, they’re short-haired. They’re a model for all white youth and they are the hope of our country. We would like to tell the people of the United States, the Third World War has begun! Join us in the fight for freedom because we are everywhere, and we’re happy, and we’re free, and we’re going to make the world free!”

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Stone Cold Revolutionaries

(Algiers/Harlem, 1971)

Total liberty for Black people or total destruction for America.
—Eldridge Cleaver

Panther minister of information Eldridge Cleaver with his wife, Kathleen Cleaver, and their baby son, Lumumba Mathias, 1969.

Those feelings of hope and optimism would not last long. Just a few months after Leary's escape, Eldridge Cleaver sent a new taped message to his comrades in the Weather Underground, letting them know the Panthers had begun to sour on their fugitive guests.

"We took upon ourselves Timothy and Rosemary [Leary's wife] at your request," Eldridge told them, "in order to demonstrate our love and solidarity for you, and our great, undying respect for the beautiful, revolutionary work. [But] it has become very clear there's something seriously wrong with both Dr. Leary and his wife's brain. And I attribute this to the multiple acid trips that they have taken."

Leary and his wife had alienated their Panther hosts by making racist comments, dropping acid day and night, and drawing unwanted attention from Cleaver's protectors in the Algerian government. Even worse, Leary's single-minded focus on "revolution in consciousness" rather than *actual* revolution had changed Cleaver's mind about an alliance with the drug-fueled youth counterculture. He decided to expel Leary from Algeria.

"We feel that we need people with clear heads," he explained to the Weathermen, "sober people who have their wits about them. Stone cold revolutionaries, motivated by revolutionary love."

It turned out Eldridge was right. Leary wasn't a stone cold revolutionary after all. When U.S. agents caught up with him a few years later in Afghanistan, Leary was incarcerated again, this time in Folsom Prison, in the cell next to Charles Manson. He was now facing twenty years, and when the FBI offered quick release in exchange for information, Leary jumped at the chance to cooperate. According to his now-declassified FBI file, Leary "furnished extensive information which should result in indictment of numerous Weathermen, Weatherman attorneys and Weathfugs [Weather Underground fugitives]."

Meanwhile, back in New York, the Panther 21—the so-called Cleaver Faction of the larger Party—followed up with their own, even more pointed message to their friends in the Weather Underground:

> We, of the Panther 21, take this opportunity to greet you with a spirit of revolutionary love and solidarity—that spirit that revolutionists feel for each other.
>
> We wish to make known to you that we feel an unrighteous act has been done to you by the self-proclaimed "vanguard" parties by their obvious neglect in not openly supporting you [and] your righteous revolutionary actions. But they have all but ignored us also—so in that respect we are in similar waters.

The East Coast Panthers were telling the Weathermen that even if the national Panther Party had distanced itself from the Weather Underground's bombing campaign, the Panther 21 still appreciated their comrades' brand of violent radical solidarity; in fact, they urged them not to abandon their "military strategy."

> We are sorry to hear that the town-house "forever destroyed" your "belief that armed struggle is the only real struggle . . ."
>
> Revolution is ARMED STRUGGLE—revolution is VIOLENCE revolution is WAR—revolution is BLOODSHED—and the "duty of

a revolutionary is to make revolution . . .”

Your fellow guerrillas in the revolution,

The Panther 21

This letter would soon reach the Weather Underground—and lay the foundation for a new, more radical alliance between the revolutionary Black and white undergrounds that would shape the future of the movement, and my family, for generations.

But the message also found another, less receptive audience; back in Oakland, Black Panther Supreme Commander Huey P. Newton read the letter and expelled nine members of the Panther 21 from the Black Panther Party. He hadn’t appreciated the Panther 21’s reference to “self-proclaimed ‘vanguard’ parties” and their “obvious disregard” for the Weather Underground’s “righteous revolutionary actions,” which he rightly saw as a dig at his decisions and a challenge to his leadership.

The FBI, of course, had been trying for years to create cracks in the Black Panther Party. Hoover had instructed his agents to “write numerous letters to Cleaver criticizing Newton for his lack of leadership” and to make “anonymous phone calls” to spread rumors about both men to increase their animosity. “Purpose of counterintelligence action is to disrupt BPP,” he wrote, “and it is immaterial whether facts exist to substantiate the charge.” The Weather Underground letter was the final straw.

In 1971, picked apart by the FBI’s COINTELPRO dirty tricks, and deepened by their dispute over the Weather Underground, the rift between East and West Coast Panthers finally ripped wide open. That February, Huey Newton came east to give a speech to students at Yale University. As was customary by this point at Panther events, party members worked security instead of police; the West Coast entourage was joined by three members of the New York group: Eddie “Jamal” Joseph, Michael “Ceteweyo” Tabor, and Richard Moore, a.k.a. Dhoruba bin Wahad. But the East Coast Panthers were still reeling from Huey Newton’s response to their Weather Underground letter and had started hearing disturbing rumors that, angry and fearful about his own safety, he had put out a hit on the Panther 21.

“Huey Newton had become a very paranoid man,” Panther 21 member Jamal Joseph told me. “I mean, the paranoia was so high that he would step on stage and literally have a ring of people around him!”

After his speech, bodyguards from both east and west ushered Huey out, through the New Haven sleet, to his car, where they were met by a group of student reporters from the *Yale Daily News*. As a white kid with a camera worked to get a better angle on Huey, he slipped on the icy concrete, hit the ground, and his flash went off. “You hear all of this noise,” Jamal Joseph remembers, “and guns come out from everywhere! Half of the guns are pointed toward this poor kid who had slipped. And the other half of the guns are pointed at each other—East Coast and West Coast. And there’s a moment where we all look at each other. No one says a word . . . But we understand where we’re at now.”

Jamal and his East Coast friends had planned to join Huey and his entourage that night for dinner, but as they drove to the appointed meeting spot, they started to reconsider. “I remember I was driving,” Jamal says, “and [Ceteweyo] said, ‘Jamal, do you know your way to New York?’ And I said, ‘I do.’ And he said, ‘That’s where we’re going then, because if we go [to dinner], we’re going to be killed.’ And that’s the night I went underground.”

That spring, dozens of New York Panthers, including nearly half of the Panther 21, vanished. Just like the Weathermen before them, they stopped showing up for court dates, abandoned their cars and apartments, changed their names, and disappeared. And just as the International Panthers had welcomed Leary in Algeria a few months earlier, the Weather Underground now stepped up to return the favor and welcome their new comrades into the underground.

“When Black people went underground,” Jamal told me, “it was that white underground that would help find hiding places, money, food, help them get out the country, et cetera. That became our modern Underground Railroad, to be like, real clear.”

“The whites were supporting our work,” agreed Panther 21 member Sekou Odinga, who by this point had secretly returned from Algeria to take over the paramilitary leadership of the East Coast Panthers. “They were instrumental in helping us obtain housing, obtain other things . . . Whites could do what we couldn’t do, go down south to survivalist camps where they have gun sales and stuff. We couldn’t go there. They could go in there and look just like the survivalists and buy guns and ammunition and stuff like that.”

For the Weather Underground, this was a central part of their revolutionary project—to build a cross-racial alliance against the U.S. government, and to act as reinforcements and supply lines for what they saw as the Black revolutionary vanguard.

"That was part of what we thought of as our responsibility," Bill told me. "We had learned a lot in a few months about how to get decent ID. We'd learned a lot about how to separate the ownership of a car from the renting of an apartment, a lot about building safehouses. And we felt that our liberation, our freedom, our desire to live in a decent world, required the end of white supremacy. So we felt an obligation—we were in solidarity with the Black movement and with the Black underground."

This is how the Black and white undergrounds learned to trust each other, to build a relationship—with small acts of solidarity while on the run.

"We knew people by their practice," Jamal says. "I don't want to trivialize it by comparing it to a band, but when you're in the music scene, you realize there are certain people you jam with well, and you form a band, right? And before you know it, you have a collective that is really feeling the same way about the work and about what the work needs to represent."

My mom won't talk about any of this—about what the white underground did with or for the Black underground. To her, all this is still covered by the code of secrecy. "Sharing resources was important," she acknowledged, "but I'm not going to go farther than that. They [the Black underground] did their own thing. We just kept asking how we could be of help."

"I don't go into too much detail about times and place," Jamal Joseph laughed when I told him about my mom's reluctance to talk. "But I'll just say that I remember meeting Bernardine and the support for exactly what I'm talking about was like *real support*. I remember coming away going like, 'That's a real sister right there.'"

The Black underground, meanwhile, was building its own aboveground support network—people who could help their underground fugitives stay hidden, people like the man I'm named after, Zayd Shakur, the East Coast Panthers' minister of information.

I've always wanted to know more about Zayd, since I carry his name but never got to meet him in person. Apparently, he was known as the artist and dreamer of the New York Panther crew, a man, according to his friend

Assata Shakur, who could recite the poems of Langston Hughes by heart and knew the biographies of great jazz musicians like John Coltrane and Bessie Smith. He was also, according to Jamal Joseph, “a tailor and a designer,” and by all accounts the best-dressed Panther in New York, “because wearing Afrocentric stuff was the shit in those days.”

“When we started wearing dashikis,” Sekou Odinga told me, “I learned how to make a dashiki, and I was telling [Zayd] how I did it, and next time I see him, he’d made two dashikis. Then he started making jalabiyas [traditional Muslim loose-fitting, long-sleeved robes]. Then he started making a jalabiya into a double-sided coat. You could turn it inside out, and it’d be another coat! The guy was just real creative.”

Afeni Shakur (Tupac’s mom) with Zayd Shakur.

When people started to go underground in New York, Zayd was put in charge of making disguises for Panther fugitives. He had to tone down the swag, of course, because the new look, according to Jamal, had to be “as non-Pantherish as you could—to cut your hair and brush it to the side, and have on a corny sweater and some corny shoes so that you could just look like a college student or somebody coming home from work.”

As they acclimated to their new fugitive status, the actions of the Black underground started small. They were hiding from the police and their Panther rivals in California and arming themselves for what they saw as a

coming war. “We were training folks for armed struggle,” Jamal told me. “And so a lot of the work was getting guns donated, buying guns, putting safehouses and escape routes together.” And like the Weathermen, the Black underground needed money to fund the work, so soon they started targeting the drug dealers and pimps who had been getting rich off their communities for years. In the view of the New York Panthers, this was stealing from the predatory rich to give to the deserving poor. “There were bullies, there were dope pushers, there were predators that preyed on the people in the community,” Sekou Odinga told me. “And we would speak to that. Do things that would *equalize* that a little bit.”

Armed guerrillas like Sekou and Jamal would storm into a known drug den with rifles and shotguns. “You come in with a couple of bags,” Jamal says. “One to scoop drugs, one to scoop the money.” They’d tie up the drug dealers, kick out the addicts, and then, on a street corner outside, the Panthers would make an announcement. “We declare this liberated territory,” they’d tell the astonished crowd. “Anyone who is dealing drugs is committing genocide on our people. They will answer to the justice of the people.” And then they’d dump the drugs into the sewer. “The grandmothers would be like, ‘Yes, Lord, thank you, Jesus!’” Jamal says. “But there’d be a couple of junkies seeing the drugs going down the sewers like, ‘God damn, no!’”

Soon, however, it became clear that taking down local dealers and pimps wouldn’t be enough to fund the revolution. And the Black underground didn’t have any other ways to raise new funds—no sympathetic rock bands or wealthy leftist lawyers helping them out. As underground Panther Jihad Abdulmumit told me, “This movement is not going to go down by having bake sales or fundraising. And nobody at that time was writing any grants as such.”

Jihad himself was part of a small underground cell in Rochester, New York, focused on “expropriations,” or bank robberies—though the East Coast Panthers considered these more akin to what we today might call reparations. “As opposed to a bank robbery, expropriation is more a term that relates to the revolutionary aspects of what you’re doing,” explains Jihad. “You’re doing this for a particular reason, not for jewelry and sneakers or some personal aggrandizement. You’re doing this as it connects to a movement.”

Jihad worked with a crew of three or four other guys in Rochester. Two would stand guard while the other two stormed into a bank, waved their guns around, jumped over the counter and emptied the money drawers—in and out in under thirty seconds, and back into the waiting getaway car.

One time, Jihad's crew was leaving a bank after a robbery, listening to a CB radio to track any police response, when they heard truck drivers on the highway calling out warnings about police on the road. "Breaker, breaker one nine," Jihad remembers hearing, "we have a convoy of Smokey Bears [trucker slang for cop cars] . . . And then a trucker said, 'Breaker, breaker one nine, by golly, we have a bear in the air!' He even made it sound poetic! And here comes a helicopter coming down kind of low! And the chase is on! It went through Franklin County and into the next county, shooting up the highway there. Eventually it was nothing *but* police. So, you know, they kicked our ass for sure."

Jihad was arrested after that chase and would eventually serve more than twenty-three years in Lewisburg and Leavenworth federal penitentiaries, for a series of bank robberies and a number of attempted prison breaks.

"Somebody may look at it now," he told me, "and think they have some better paramilitary approach to things. But the thing about it is, we had the balls and the audacity to do it. And the reason that we were doing it for our own liberation. That's the only reason I would risk my life as a teenager. I could have been anything. I could have probably went to college and ended up being some Uncle Tom congressman or something!"

* * *

In 1982, when I was five years old—a decade after the split of the Black Panther Party and the founding of the Black underground—I stood alone with my father on a crowded subway platform in West Harlem, holding his hand, and asked him if there was anything I could do to make him stop loving me.

My mother was in jail, locked up in Manhattan Correctional Center for refusing to testify against her friends in the East Coast Panthers. And Bill was raising us alone, visiting Bernardine on weekends, working a series of minimum-wage jobs, and barely keeping his head above water. I knew, in a literal sense, that my life depended on him. I also knew he was falling apart

—emotionally exhausted, depressed, and drowning under the stress of single parenthood. So, it was the kind of question a child asks just for reassurance. To hear that a parent's love is unconditional. That nothing could ever change it, no matter what.

And Bill did say that, at first. He told me I was the most important thing in his world—more important even than his own life. To protect me and my brother, he promised, he would throw himself in front of a moving train (a cliché, of course, but made impressive at that moment by a very real 1/9 subway hurtling toward us out of a tunnel).

I believed him. In fact, I knew it must be true, because I saw his self-sacrifice for us every day—his long hours working multiple jobs, his lonely and desperate dedication to taking care of his kids, and the toll it was taking on him. But for some reason, I decided to press the issue. Maybe I just wanted to hear him say it again, to squeeze a little extra comfort out of this strange conversation. "So, nothing?" I asked again. "Nothing I could do, right?"

Bill was quiet for a moment as we boarded the subway, and the train started to crawl out of the station.

"Well," he said finally, as we lurched into the dark tunnel. "Maybe if you were a racist."

I think he had in mind Bull Connor and the KKK, or the skinheads then making headlines beating up Black kids in Bensonhurst and Bed-Stuy. He was groping for the worst thing he could possibly imagine, to try to be honest about the few things he viewed as truly, unforgivably evil. But for me, as a five-year-old kid, watching the strobe of our reflection disappear and reappear in the subway windows, his answer sounded terrifyingly vague and equivocal. My father's unconditional love suddenly had a condition to it, and that alone scared me to death.

After all, he hadn't said "if you lynched somebody" or "if you joined the KKK." Or even "if you called someone a slur." There was no tangible action for me to take or avoid, no clear marker for what would qualify as disqualifying. "Being a racist" was a passive state of existence—involuntary, maybe even inherent. A thought crime. And while I was pretty sure I was *not* a racist, it seemed at least possible that I might one day *feel* something by accident, *think* something terrible, even unconsciously, and so fall out of his love.

It’s worth mentioning here that Bill has a big tattoo on his back of the abolitionist John Brown; his greatest hero and inspiration is a man who took his own family into a failed and fatal anti-slavery raid on the U.S. Armory at Harper’s Ferry to steal rifles to arm and incite a massive slave uprising. Two of Brown’s sons, Watson and Oliver, were killed in that attempt, and Brown himself was eventually hanged for treason. So, it didn’t surprise me that my father was willing to sacrifice almost anything—his future, his freedom, or his life—in what he viewed as an ongoing battle against white supremacy. I was only beginning to understand that that list included our family, too.

Many years later, when I turned seventeen and was a junior in high school, Bill mentioned to me, in a kind of offhand, casual way, that he had always hoped, when I turned eighteen and came of age, that the two of us might go south together to kill the man who had murdered Medgar Evers.

Evers was a Black organizer in Mississippi, field director of the NAACP, and a hero and martyr of the civil rights movement. The man who shot him, with a rifle, in 1963, in the driveway outside Evers’s home, with Evers’s wife and kids watching helplessly through their kitchen window, was Byron De La Beckwith, a notorious Klansman and white supremacist.

De La Beckwith bragged about the killing. He was proud of it. He confessed to the shooting multiple times, in public and in private. But back in the 1960s, each of his murder trials ended in a hung jury—an all-white hung jury, with his defense paid for by the Mississippi White Citizens’ Council. So, this was a classic American miscarriage of justice. De La Beckwith, like many other white vigilante murderers of his place and time, had escaped accountability because he was protected by the white racist power structure of the American South. He deserved some kind of reckoning. I believed that. I wanted to be part of it. Honestly, I felt kind of proud that my father had asked me.

But talking about taking your teenage son, for his eighteenth birthday, on a vigilante road trip across the country, to kill a Klansman and avenge a cold case from decades earlier? I don’t know if I realized, even then, how strange that really was.

Still, I could imagine it—out on the road with my father, rifles on a rack, tracing our route along the maps of the *Rand McNally Road Atlas*, back through the underground—I-55 south to St. Louis, down to Memphis,

through the red mud farms and soybean fields of the South, all the way down to Jackson, Mississippi.

We would stake out De La Beckwith's house from across the street, just as he had done to Evers. We'd find a spot where we could watch his front door without being seen. We would track him together through our rifle sights, as he had tracked his victim, urban guerrillas preparing an ambush. And when De La Beckwith came outside, one of us—*which one?*—would pull the trigger.

Of course, it never happened.

The same year, as I got ready to graduate from high school, De La Beckwith was finally arrested—the cold case of Evers's murder "solved" after more than three decades of neglect. De La Beckwith was convicted and sentenced to life in prison; he died behind bars, of natural causes, in 2001.

Which might prove something about patience, about the painstaking work of the legal system and the long arc of history bending slowly, but inevitably, toward justice.

Or maybe De La Beckwith had just lived a few years too long. After all, most of his fellow race warriors—the murderers of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, of Emmett Till, and of countless victims of lynchings and racial violence—never had to answer for their crimes.

But waiting for the slow gears of justice to turn was never my parents' style. They were revolutionaries, angry and impatient, always on fire to respond to the violence being done to Black people in America and to people of color overseas. They were determined, from the earliest years of their activist lives, to reject the white skin privilege they had inherited, the comfort and willful blindness that was part of their birthright. They would not be complicit. They would not be silent. For every extrajudicial killing of a Black leader, every prison massacre, every cop acquitted of murder by an all-white jury, they wanted to show that there would be a response from white America's children, a violent declaration that this was not being done in their names.

I asked Bill recently if he remembered that conversation we had on the subway platform all those years ago, about whether he would still love me if I were a racist. He didn't, of course; that was over four decades ago, and the conversation had stuck with me, an impressionable child, but would have been forgettable for him, already an adult. So I gave him the gist.

“Well,” he said, after I finished, “if I said it the way you remember it. *If* I said it, I was saying it as a joke. It was a throwaway.”

“Okay, fine,” I conceded. “But what’s the joke? And why that throwaway? I was asking about commitment, right? About family. Why make a five-year-old’s worry about unconditional love into a conversation about race?”

“Because,” he said, “that was the central part of my life. And still is.”

Even though I was an adult now, a father myself, I could hear the familiar bewildered tone of a kid in over his head start to creep into my voice. “The central part? More than being a teacher? More than being a father, even?”

Bill was quiet for a moment—our same old pattern, trying to take my questions seriously, to make his answer simple and comprehensible to somebody who didn’t necessarily have the perspective, or life experience, to understand.

“Well,” he said finally, “back then, you have to understand, we saw something like a flash of light—the kind of insight of a single bright lightbulb in a dark room—the insight that *everything* about our country, everything about our culture, everything about our politics: *it’s all about race*. Wherever you start, you’ll find race.”

This sounded like he had in mind, once again, his hero John Brown, whose friend, Frederick Douglass, famously said of Brown that he “saw the evil [of slavery] through no mist or haze, but in a light of infinite brightness.” But it sounded to me ambivalent, less a justification than a confession, and I made a note to think about it later—that this might be important for me to understand.

“I think an insight like that can both be illuminating and blinding,” Bill continued. “We were illuminated in ways that are rare and precious. But also blinded. Because if you can’t see nuance and complexity around the edges, you make enemies of people who aren’t your enemies. And you take actions that you shouldn’t take. And we did both.”

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Acts of War

(Washington, DC, 1971)

How can we talk about a nation and not talk about an army? That's not realistic. Every nation has an army. So, power to the people's army. The nation must come to fruition through revolutionary action.

—Mtayari Shabaka Sundiata, soldier in the Black Liberation Army

A Capitol Police officer walks through the rubble after the Weather Underground bombing of the Capitol, March 1, 1971.

Inspired—or called out—by the example of their friends in the East Coast Panthers, Bernardine, Bill, and the Weather Underground went back to work. They'd absorbed the criticism of the Panther 21 letter. And despite their turn away from the "military strategy," they would now try to show

their comrades that at least some white people could still be stone cold revolutionaries.

On February 27, 1971, two young white women walked into the U.S. Capitol, dressed like secretaries but with the components of a bomb—dynamite, timer, and blasting caps—strapped to their legs. Published sources have since identified the two as Kathy Boudin and Bernardine Dohrn, though neither woman was ever charged with the crime. I asked them, of course, whether they were involved, but this is one of those areas still cloaked in the underground's code of silence.

"I'm not going to tell you who put it there," my mom said simply. "And I'm not going to tell you who worked on it."

Here's what I do know, having pieced together the details from people who heard the story secondhand:

The two women found an out-of-the-way spot on the first floor—an unmarked restroom below the Senate chamber in the original wing of the Capitol building, near the Great Rotunda. Inside a locked stall, they attached a blasting cap to a timer, wired it to a cylinder of dynamite, and carefully placed the assembled device on a ledge behind an ancient, dusty wall, where no one would find it before nightfall.

But unexpectedly, the ledge—well over a hundred years old—collapsed, and the bomb fell several feet, crashing to the marble floor.

The two women froze. For a long moment neither moved, or spoke. But they heard no explosion. No footsteps or voices coming down the hall to investigate. So, they quickly washed their hands, left the bathroom, walked out of the Capitol building, and disappeared back into the underground.

The next day, to make sure the explosion would go off on schedule, another team had to go back in to place a smaller "starter device" on top of the first bomb, in case the timer had been damaged in the fall. Then, on March 1, just before 1 a.m., a man dialed the Capitol switchboard. "The building will blow up in thirty minutes," he told an operator. "This is real. Evacuate the building immediately. This is in protest of the Nixon involvement in Laos."

Half an hour later, two syncopated detonations—the starter bomb and its much larger sibling—obliterated the sinks and stalls of the restroom, shattering windows hundreds of feet away and blowing the doors of the nearby Senate barbershop into a courtyard outside. The five-foot-thick brick

arches of the Capitol building were lifted a few inches off the ground before settling back onto their foundations.

In the aftermath of the bomb, President Nixon denounced the attack as "a shocking act of violence that will outrage all Americans," and Republican Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott argued that it showed the Weathermen "believe that if they cannot persuade by reason or by logic, perhaps they can terrify the American people." But the liberal, antiwar wing of the Democratic Party was a bit more equivocal in its response. Conceding that the Capitol bombing was "barbaric," Senator George McGovern nonetheless placed most of the blame on Nixon's foreign policy, what he called "our Vietnam madness." "It is not possible," McGovern said, "to teach an entire generation to bomb and destroy others in an undeclared, unjustified, unending war, without paying a terrible price in the derangement of our society."

McGovern was right—about the ripple effect of government violence and the ongoing derangement of American society. The Weathermen had been careful, once again, not to hurt anyone, but their action still had real-world consequences. Following the Capitol bombing, for the first time in history, police started screening visitors coming to visit Congress, using bomb-sniffing dogs and nearly doubling the size of the Capitol force. The "People's House" had been put on lockdown.

I asked my father, in the wake of the January 6 insurrection, whether he had any second thoughts about that action, after watching the place being stormed by antidemocratic rioters in 2021—whether it gave him pause to see an attack on our government from the other side, and all the corrosive consequences of vigilante violence on American democracy.

"Well, there are insurrections against the state that I'm all for," he told me. "The French Revolution; the Haitian, Cuban, or Russian revolutions. Insurrections like 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia [site of Nat Turner's slave rebellion]. But these fascists taking over Washington? Of course. That's a fascist insurrection. You have to oppose that. The question is, what are you doing it for?"

For my father, insurrection—rebellion—is a tactic, not a goal; it's a means to an end, and the way you go about it is less important, ultimately, than the change you're trying to make. He thinks, put simply, that there are good revolutions and bad revolutions. Popular uprisings and military coups,

after all, both use force, or the threat of force, to achieve their ends, but those ends, in the real world, can be vastly different.

For me, the theoretical distinction is not quite so clean. The means matter, and a resistance movement that justifies violence, especially against civilians, will often alienate its natural allies and betray its own ideals. Of course, it's also true that there are places and times in history when any of us might concede the necessity of a militant or even violent resistance—to fight against slavery, for example. Or fascism. Or genocide. But were the conflicts of the 1960s—the Vietnam War and the assault on the civil rights movement—such a time? Is today? In any case, who gets to decide?

Because justifying the use of force on one side always risks a tit-for-tat spiral of normalized political violence, eventually leading to the breakdown of civic democracy and the rule of law. Setting off bombs, even if the targets are just empty government buildings, carries with it an implicit threat that not only invites government repression but can terrorize ordinary people. People who worked in the Capitol building, for example—or who just saw the destruction on TV and felt less safe. Those people might have felt, understandably, that it's a slippery slope, and that no one is truly safe when radicals decide the best way to make political change is with dynamite.

Weathermen, on the other hand, both then and now, insist that their bombs were never intended to terrorize but to send a message—to draw symbolic attention to the larger violence being carried out by the American military and law enforcement against defenseless civilians.

"I think the word 'terrorist' is misapplied to us," Bill told me. "And the reason is obvious. If you define terrorism as attacks on ordinary people for a political end to intimidate and frighten in order to win a political point, then terrorism is everywhere. But the main terrorists in the last 150 years have been governments. We were *objecting* to a terrorist war. We were not terrorists."

But this, too, is a deflection. Most violence in the world *is* carried out by governments, and the U.S. military in particular has committed its share of atrocities, but the government's violence—or, for that matter, the asymmetric terrorism of right-wing vigilante groups, from the Ku Klux Klan to the Proud Boys—doesn't excuse left-wing resistance movements from either political or ethical criticism. While you might find a few instances in history—like John Brown's raid or Denmark Vesey's rebellion

—where political violence seems justified, most such attacks are counterproductive, and violence during peacetime, especially targeting innocent civilians, is nearly always both strategically and morally catastrophic.

In fact, the violence of the Weather Underground had already led to one tragedy—and their support for the East Coast Panthers' war on the police would soon lead to even more bloodshed, and take them down an increasingly dangerous, and ethically disturbing, road.

* * *

As the FBI redoubled their efforts to find the Weathermen, the bombing campaign continued, even accelerated.

In August, "Soledad Brother" George Jackson, co-founder of the militant Black Guerrilla Family, was shot by guards as he tried to escape from San Quentin prison. A week later, two bombs exploded simultaneously in different cities, San Francisco and Sacramento—a display of the Weather Underground's growing confidence in its tradecraft. In its subsequent communiqué (Number 10), the group dedicated these twin attacks to "George Jackson, Black Warrior, revolutionary leader, political prisoner, shot dead by racist forces at San Quentin."

A week later, the Attica uprising began, and was violently suppressed by armed corrections officers and state police, who killed thirty-three mostly Black, unarmed inmates, as well as the prison guards being held hostage. A few days later, a new explosion went off, this time at the Department of Corrections headquarters in Albany. A radio station received an anonymous call claiming responsibility on behalf of the Weather Underground, saying the attack was to show solidarity with "the courageous prisoners of Attica" and "other twentieth-century slave ships."

"That was a powerful idea," Angela Davis told me. "That there were these white people who really wanted to support the Black liberation movement."

Their friends in the Panther 21 seemed to agree. "We feel the Weather Underground fits truly in a revolutionary manner with Malcolm's 'whites who are really fed up,'" they wrote. "Like old John Brown, and [they] are showing it in a progressive and revolutionary manner."

The remaining members of the Panther 21, meanwhile, were getting ready to learn their own fate. Over the course of their two-year trial, the original twenty-one had been whittled down to thirteen. Some, like sixteen-year-old Jamal Joseph, had their cases severed due to their youth, and disappeared into the underground; a few, like Dhoruba and Cetewayo, had already fled the country. The remaining thirteen had been in prison since their arrest two years earlier. One of them, Afeni Shakur, was now eight months pregnant with her baby, Tupac, who would be born just after the trial.

As they gathered in the courtroom with lawyers and supporters, there were so many charges against so many defendants that it took almost twenty minutes for the jury foreman to read out the verdicts.

Not guilty. On all 156 counts.

The defendants erupted in cheers—crying, laughing, and hugging people in the crowd—while Justice John Murtagh sat alone at the bench, grimly staring straight ahead. The trial had cost the government more than two million dollars—the longest and most expensive trial in New York state history—and had ended in a complete acquittal.

Talking to reporters afterward, Black jurors were open about their feelings toward the police and prosecution. “If I was going to indict anybody,” said Ben Giles, a sixty-two-year-old ex-longshoreman, “I would have indicted the DA and the judge, for a conspiracy to break up the Panther Party. I really would.” And fifty-three-year-old Eleter Yanes revealed that before the trial she had been “a little afraid of the Panthers and not as afraid of the police. Now I’m a little more afraid of the police than I am of the Panthers.”

But it took more than Black jurors to achieve a unanimous acquittal; the jury included five Black jurors, one Puerto Rican, and six whites. The white jurors, too, had been changed by what they saw at the trial—by the evidence of a years-long illegal campaign by police and the FBI against the Black Panther Party. As the “not guilty” verdicts were read out, white juror Ed Kennebeck even raised his fist in a Black Power salute.

Ed had begun the trial as a mainstream liberal, what he called a “believer in the *New York Times*,” but the evidence he saw in court of police violence and government misconduct had radicalized him. “Blow something up? I’m for it,” he told reporters afterward. “Not people. But if I thought bombing would work? I’d be for it. I’m sure a lot of people would.”

* * *

The Panther 13 were now free. But their comrades in the underground were still at large—they'd kept a low profile during the trial, trying not to do anything that might jeopardize their comrades' case.

That period of quiet was about to come to an end. A week after the Panther 21 acquittal, on May 19, 1971—a symbolically important date, as the birthday of both Ho Chi Minh and Malcolm X—the underground paid a visit to the home of District Attorney Frank Hogan.

Ever since the Weatherman firebombing of Judge Murtagh's house fifteen months earlier, police had been on high alert for attacks against court officials; DA Hogan himself had been placed under twenty-four-hour protection for the duration of the trial. But on this night, just after a shift change, the two cops parked outside Hogan's house saw a car flash by, speeding the wrong way down the one-way street, with a Black man driving and another beside him in the passenger seat.

The officers, apparently forgetting their primary assignment, hit the siren and gave chase. They caught up with the runaway car at a red light on 106th and Riverside. But when the officers pulled up alongside their target, the driver slumped down in his seat and the passenger leaned across his chest, aiming a .45 caliber submachine gun directly at the police.

The burst of gunfire shattered the cruiser's windows, punched a circle of holes in the door, and riddled both officers with bullets. The car screeched off, leaving them to bleed out in their seats. Paramedics arrived and rushed the two men to St. Luke's Hospital, where they underwent hours of emergency surgery. Miraculously, doctors were able to save both their lives.

The next targets would not be so lucky.

Two nights later, on May 21, officers Joseph Piagentini (white) and Waverly Jones (Black) responded to a 911 domestic violence call near the Polo Grounds housing projects in Harlem. They spoke to a woman who declined to press charges and left without making an arrest. But as they returned to their patrol car, they passed two young Black men leaning on the hood of a Cadillac. The two fell in step behind the officers, who didn't even have time to turn before the men opened fire.

Officer Jones was shot three times in his spine and once in the back of his head; he was dead before he hit the sidewalk. Piagentini, too, was hit in the back. He fell forward, and one of his assailants kneeled down, drew the

officer's revolver from its holster, and shot Piagentini in the head with his own gun.

That night, outside a room filled with grieving police and family members at Harlem Hospital, Edward Kiernan, the president of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, showed reporters the bloodied clothing of the two murdered cops. "Trembling with emotion," he instructed his surviving members to "purchase a shotgun and keep it loaded and ready to use at all times . . . If circumstances require [a] patrolman to use his gun, he will shoot to kill!"

Later that night, a young Black man walked into the *New York Times* offices carrying a package. When a guard asked him what was inside, the man dropped what he was holding, turned, and fled. Inside the package, reporters found the license plate of the car officers Curry and Binetti had pursued the night they were shot, along with a live .45 caliber bullet. They also found a typewritten statement claiming responsibility for both attacks, on behalf of a previously unknown entity:

The Black Liberation Army.

"ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE," the statement began. "Just as the fascist Marines and Army are confronted with the guns of the Vietnamese Liberation Army, the domestic armed forces of racism and oppression will be confronted with the guns of the BLACK LIBERATION ARMY, who will mete out in the tradition of Malcolm and all true revolutionaries real justice."

The Black Liberation Army, or BLA, was a new name for the underground militarized wing of the New York Black Panthers—primarily, former members of the Panther 21 and what the FBI still called the "Cleaver Faction."

Just as SDS had birthed its own radicalized, violent offshoot in the Weather Underground, so the Panthers in New York had emerged as the militant, clandestine wing of the aboveground parent organization. And like the Weathermen before them, the BLA embraced a "military strategy" modeled on anti-colonial resistance movements overseas—a series of autonomous splinter cells inspired by Che's *foco* theory, ready and willing to "bring the war home."

"We tried praying," explained BLA military leader Sekou Odinga. "We tried . . . to vote in people who would be more considerate to our needs. We tried sitting in. We tried everything and we got the same thing from

everybody; we got killed, locked up, beat up . . . Dr. Martin Luther King was locked up again and again and again for his troubles and finally murdered for it. So we finally realized that there was but one other way, the way people did it all over the world throughout time: to get your freedom you had to fight for it."

Those two shootings in May 1971 would mark the opening salvo of a long and bloody war between the BLA and the NYPD—a war that would soon ensnare my parents' friends and my extended family in a dangerous escalatory cycle of violence. Though, to hear the BLA tell it, their "war" had started much earlier—with deadly police violence against Black communities going back generations. "They [the police] were the occupying army," Jamal Joseph told me. "They were the ones that were murdering Black men, women and children . . . and the response was: yes, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. You cannot wantonly come in and murder people in the community without a military political consequence."

Five days after the shootings, Richard Nixon called J. Edgar Hoover into the Oval Office, wanting to know if these police killings were the work of random "thugs" or the start of the violent Black uprising he and his FBI director had long feared. The president told Hoover not to "pull any punches in going all out in gathering information . . . on the situation in New York."

The government targeting of the BLA shifted into high gear. The NYPD and the FBI were going to war with the underground.

* * *

Bernardine, Bill, and their friends were still determined to help their Black comrades—to shield activists and fugitives from the fates of Fred Hampton or Bobby Hutton, both by aiding the former Panthers in the underground and by showing that America's white youth could also be a dangerous threat.

But after the townhouse explosion the Weathermen had made a commitment, to themselves and to the larger counterculture, to avoid deadly violence. So they now faced a crossroads and a contradiction: how do you fight beside an "army" without any killing? How do you take part in a deadly battle without risking casualties? How do you escalate a war without bloodshed?

Their solution proved elegant in its simplicity, if ultimately incoherent and unsatisfying, even to their allies. The Weather Underground decided they would still call in warnings, still make sure not to kill anyone with their bombs—after Mendocino, Bernardine was unshakable in her opposition to the "military strategy"—but they would now escalate the *spectacle*, double down on the symbolic value of their attacks, and try to distract the government from their fight against the Black underground by targeting the heart of the American war machine itself.

On May 19, 1972, in a DC safehouse, a young woman pulled on a dark wig and thick glasses. She painted her fingertips with a layer of clear nail polish so she wouldn't leave any prints. She packed a cheap briefcase full of blank papers to hide the device hidden inside. At 9 a.m., a friend drove her across town and dropped her at the marble portico that served as the main visitors' entrance of the Pentagon.

The woman had been visiting the building for weeks: roaming the halls, eating lunch next to civil servants and military personnel, peeking into unused bathrooms and offices hidden down deserted hallways. No one ever asked her what she was doing—she was a young white woman dressed like a secretary. She fit right in.

And she knew exactly where she was headed; she walked confidently through the maze-like passageways to the air force wing of the Pentagon, heels echoing on the polished marble floors. She slipped into an empty women's restroom, unscrewed a drain in the floor, pulled a flashlight-sized device out of her briefcase, and slid it down into a pipe. Then she replaced the drain cap, washed her hands, and headed back outside, climbing into an idling car at the front entrance and disappearing into DC's rush-hour traffic.

Just after midnight, the Pentagon's emergency line rang and a man's voice told the operator, "In twenty-five minutes, a bomb will explode in the air force section of the Pentagon. I'm calling from the Weather Underground, and believe me, this is no prank. Clear the area. Get everyone out. You have twenty-five minutes. Vietnam will win!"

Half an hour later, a huge explosion shook the Pentagon, tearing a two-foot hole through the floor, knocking down a series of walls, and caving in parts of the ceiling. The few employees working the night shift ran out of their offices to see what looked like "a big fog bank coming down the corridor."

No one was killed or injured by the explosion—the late hour and warning call had once again prevented serious casualties—but it was the first attack on the Pentagon since its construction during World War II, and the most consequential assault on the military's headquarters in U.S. history up to that time. The *New York Times* called it "a return to the mindless display of violence as a means of registering dissent from the violence of war . . . it is important to recognize the culprits for what they are—not idealistic activists but vandals posing as revolutionaries."

The Weather Underground, however, felt that they had achieved their symbolic goal: they hadn't hurt anyone, but they'd brought the war home, in a way even Terry Robbins could never have imagined.

* * *

But activists who go to war with the American military will quickly find themselves outnumbered and outgunned. Federal law enforcement officials, frustrated by their inability to find Bernardine and her fellow fugitives and enraged by their new conflict with the Black Liberation Army, soon tore up their own rulebook, ready to crash through any remaining constitutional guardrails.

"I am greatly concerned at the lack of the results obtained," wrote Hoover to his special agents at the beginning of 1972. "During 1971, only one Top Ten Fugitive was apprehended . . . It is intolerable . . . The fact that a majority of the subjects on the Ten Most Wanted Fugitives List are in the 'New Left' category makes it particularly important that these cases receive imaginative investigative attention."

Hoover's agents took the hint, and let their imaginations run wild.

"What the Weathermen were doing was presenting a threat," Special Agent Bill Dyson told my podcast producer, Ariana Gharib Lee. "You got the impression, especially when they put a bomb in the Pentagon and the Capitol building, that they had the capability, and perhaps the desire, to do things that could cause disruption to our government. Like maybe they had the ability to assassinate the president. Maybe they could blow up Congress and kill congressmen. And that presented a real situation for a lot of people. Can we let this happen? Because you could literally alter history, if you could kill the president. And there were some people [in the FBI] who felt: *Anything goes*. We got to do this. We got to protect our country."

Deputy FBI director Mark Felt secretly authorized "surreptitious entries" or "black bag jobs"—illegal warrantless break-ins to gather evidence against the Weather Underground fugitives. And since the FBI couldn't find the Weathermen themselves, they went after their friends and family members—the aboveground support network.

That March, FBI agents broke into my aunt Jennifer's apartment at 217 Thompson Street in New York, an operation that involved at least fourteen covert agents and took a week to plan, with three different Bureau teams using walkie-talkies to communicate: one to track Jennifer's movements, one to keep watch in case of unexpected visitors, and a separate team of plainclothes operatives for the break-in itself.

"We'd give 'em ten to fifteen minutes to get out of the neighborhood, then we'd go," remembered FBI agent Don Strickland. "You never knew who might have stayed inside. It could have been Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn themselves. So that was pretty hairy."

Inside, agents examined and photographed Jennifer's belongings. They dusted for fingerprints, steamed open her mail, bugged her bedroom and phone, and left without leaving a trace. Those wiretaps, in fact, would remain hidden in her apartment for years. "They recorded us around the clock," Jennifer says now, after finally reading her declassified FBI file. "Everything we did, from taking a shower, to cooking, to making love. I mean, it's really such an invasion of privacy that they were in my most intimate moments." Jennifer would even find out that the FBI had taken extraordinary advantage of their access. "When the head of the FBI in New York City retired," she told me, "the FBI gave him a pair of my underwear in a glass case as a trophy. I always wondered where that piece of underwear went. But they were in and out of our apartment all the time. So, anyway, it's just disgusting, that's all."

This trophy-taking, not to mention the burglary itself, was of course illegal. Jennifer was an American citizen who hadn't been accused of any crime; she was targeted simply for being the sister of a federal fugitive. And though the FBI may have been justified in going all-out to stop anti-government violence, they had no warrant for the search; they never even applied to a judge. J. Edgar Hoover had approved the break-in himself, justifying these illegal tactics as necessary for national security. That same month, he testified before the House Subcommittee on Appropriations about how existential he considered the conflict. "Urban guerrilla warfare,"

he told Congress, “by black extremist organizations such as the Black Panther Party, by white radical groups, such as the Weathermen, and by other organized terrorists, is a serious threat to law enforcement and the entire nation.”

Two months later, Hoover was dead, felled by a heart attack at the age of seventy-seven. And for a moment, it seemed possible that the FBI’s willingness to violate the Constitution would die with its lawless founding director. But a few months later, Nixon’s new acting FBI director, L. Patrick Gray, doubled down, approving illegal surveillance techniques that even Hoover himself had resisted, telling his agents he wanted “to hunt Weatherman and similar groups to exhaustion.” This phrase was repeated three times and underlined each time, along with a new emphatic order: “I want No Holds Barred.”

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Soul of the Gang

(New York/New Jersey, 1972–73)

Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions, shaped by our oppression . . . There is and always will be, until every Black man, woman and child is free, a Black Liberation Army.

—JoAnne Chesimard, a.k.a. Assata Shakur

JoAnne Deborah Chesimard wanted poster.

Follow for extended description of Figure

The government's reaction to Black militant groups was, perhaps unsurprisingly, more violent than their response to the white underground—not just illegal surveillance and burglaries, but an all-out deadly assault. In 1971 and 1972, BLA members from New York to St. Louis to Florida were cornered and shot to death in a series of confrontations with police and the FBI. Many more were arrested. Within a year, a decentralized network that once numbered hundreds of people had been nearly wiped out, and most members of the Black Liberation Army were either locked up or dead.

I asked Sekou Odinga, the military leader of the BLA, if he was scared at the time, knowing his group was in a hot shooting war with the NYPD and the FBI. “I don’t think ‘scared’ would be the word,” he told me. “I think ‘nervous’ would be good. There’s always some nerves. I think if you didn’t have no nerves, I worry about you a little bit.”

I asked Jihad Abdulmumit, too—was he afraid? During his string of bank robberies? His repeated attempts to escape from prison? Or just walking down the street as a young man in New Jersey, knowing that he and his friends were being hunted by the federal government?

“I love that question,” he told me. “Love it because I’m scared *now* for my son, who’s seventeen. And just like he is right now, I was then. *We were not scared.* At all. *Bring it.* That was our attitude. And when we were captured, we were trying to escape. Wasn’t crying for any lawyer or anything like that. Not the young BLA, not my crew, not the teenagers. You put us in jail, we were trying to escape.”

The horror of the situation had quickly become routine. Jamal Joseph, too, remembers the sense of fatalism that quickly overtook the members of the Black underground. “When you were in the Panthers aboveground,” he told me, “you would wake up in the morning thinking, this might be the day that you got arrested or killed. In the BLA, you woke up thinking, this *is* the day.”

But even as the men who founded the organization were hunted to extinction, a new leader rose to take their place.

The woman who would become Assata Shakur was born JoAnne Deborah Byron in 1947, raised by her grandparents in North Carolina and then by her mom and an aunt in Queens. She attended a mostly white Catholic high school, and then the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), where she became involved, like many college kids of the time, in the civil rights movement. JoAnne was arrested for the first time in 1967, when she helped occupy a college office and chained the doors shut to protest the lack of a Black studies program or any substantial Black faculty.

She was married young, to Louis Chesimard, and briefly took his name, but that marriage didn’t last long, and JoAnne soon adopted the *nom de guerre* that would come to define her: Assata Shakur, or “she who struggles.”

On the night Dr. King was shot, as my mother was taking the subway downtown to grieve and rage with the masses in Times Square, Assata was on the subway herself, heading in the other direction, north toward Harlem, into the Black neighborhoods that ignited with fury after the shooting. “On the train, headed uptown,” she later wrote, “i am ready to riot [Assata uses the lower-case “i” throughout her autobiography]. i’m having daymares on the subway, imagining myself with a long knife slashing slits in white sheets. Ku Klux Klan blood is spilling. You wanna look like a ghost, you wanna look like a ghost, my mind keeps chanting, you wanna look like a ghost, well i’ll make you one.”

By the end of 1968, Assata, like Bernardine, had been thoroughly radicalized. She soon joined the Black Panther Party and became a key part of the Cleaver Faction, and close friends with Jamal, Dhoruba, Zayd, and the other radical members of the Panther 21.

When the Panthers split and most of the Harlem group disappeared or fled the country, Assata followed her friends into the underground and was soon wanted for a series of bank heists, robberies of drug dealers, and attacks on New York police. Robert Daly, deputy commissioner of the NYPD, called her “the bandit queen” of the BLA, “the final wanted fugitive, the soul of the gang, the mother hen, who kept them together, kept them moving, kept them shooting.”

“They call us thieves and bandits,” Assata said in response, in a taped message “To My People” distributed in Black neighborhoods later that year. “They say we steal. But it was not us who stole millions of Black people from the continent of Africa. We were robbed of our language, of our gods, of our culture, of our human dignity, of our labor and of our lives.”

Assata quickly became a symbol—on both sides of the war. Like Angela Davis and Bernardine Dohrn before her, Assata Shakur was young, militant, articulate, and photogenic. Her gender made her an object of lurid fascination to the news media, and an example of the lawless violence of the Black underground to police and the FBI, who eagerly spread the word about her alleged crimes.

But by the early 1970s, there was no shortage of anti-police sentiment in New York, especially in Black neighborhoods. And as with Bernardine a few years earlier, Assata’s face quickly became a symbol, her name a rallying cry. Her wanted poster started appearing in windows around

Harlem, the Bronx, and as far away as Cleveland, Detroit, Oakland, and Los Angeles, bearing the now-familiar tagline: ASSATA SHAKUR IS WELCOME HERE.

Her populist outlaw status further enraged the police, and Assata was soon charged with every BLA-adjacent crime that could possibly be linked to a woman: attempted robbery of drug dealers at the Hilton Hotel on April 6, 1971; bank robbery in Queens on August 23, 1971; hand grenade attack on a police car in Maspeth, Queens, on December 21, 1971; bank robbery in Brooklyn on March 1, 1972; another bank robbery in the Bronx six months later; and a robbery of Our Lady of the Presentation Church in Brownsville, Brooklyn, on September 14, 1972.

The FBI and the NYPD teamed up to create a new joint taskforce—code name CHESROB—sharing crime labs and information in an all-out attempt to arrest or kill the woman they still called JoAnne Chesimard.

* * *

On May 2, 1973, Assata and two of her friends took the New Jersey Turnpike through East Brunswick in a white 1965 Pontiac LeMans. Driving on a highway late at night was risky, but traveling during the day was worse—and Assata was hoping to avoid notice as she moved from one safehouse to another under cover of darkness.

Assata was in the passenger seat. Next to her, driving the car, was BLA soldier Sundiata Acoli. And stuffed in the back, with his long skinny legs pressed against the front seats, was the man I'm named after—the New York Panthers' minister of information, their underground clothing designer, and Assata's best friend and comrade, Zayd Malik Shakur.

Just after midnight, as their car passed the New Jersey Turnpike Authority building, a siren wailed behind them, red and blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror. The three glanced nervously over their shoulders. *Maybe they're after someone else? Maybe if we slow down, keep driving, they'll just pass us by?*

No luck. The flashing lights of the highway patrol stayed in their rearview mirror, signaling them to pull over to the side of the road.

Assata would later claim that their car was targeted because police thought it was inherently suspicious for Black people to have Vermont license plates. The cops argued that it was just a routine traffic stop, that the

Pontiac had been “slightly” exceeding the speed limit and had “faulty rear lights.”

In any case, State Trooper James Harper motioned the car to the side of the road, and Sundiata tried to bluff his way through. He showed the officer his license and registration, and Trooper Harper took the documents back to his cruiser to call them in. A few minutes later, a second officer, Werner Foerster, arrived on the scene as backup. Trooper Harper had apparently noticed something strange about Sundiata’s ID.

It’s not exactly clear what happened next. The only witness who wasn’t directly involved in the incident—a long-haul trucker driving north, on the other side of the turnpike—would later testify that he caught a glimpse of a uniformed state trooper struggling with a Black man at the side of the road, illuminated only by the revolving red and blue lights of a parked police cruiser. Assata later claimed in an open letter that the troopers drew their guns without provocation, “and in a split second, there was a sound that came from outside the car; there was a sudden movement, and I was shot once with my arms held up in the air and then once again from the back.”

The FBI simply noted that “shooting commenced.”

Whoever started it, the confrontation quickly turned into a pitched gun battle; a hail of bullets struck both Assata and Zayd. Trooper Harper was hit in the shoulder, and Foerster was killed with two shots from his own sidearm—either he shot himself in the chaos or the BLA members had wrestled his gun away from him.

The wounded fugitives jumped back in their car and took off, but they were chased up the turnpike by other police cruisers and cornered a few miles away. Sundiata and Zayd got out and started to run.

“They’re taking off!” a trooper shouted into his radio. “I’m firing at them. They’re in the woods!”

Assata was too badly hurt to run. She fell out of the car onto the pavement and staggered up the highway toward the cops, holding both her bleeding arms over her head, trying to surrender.

“Police were everywhere,” she later recalled. “One had a gun to my head . . . i felt myself being dragged by the feet across the pavement. My chest was on fire. My blouse was purple with blood. i was convinced that my arm had been shot off and was hanging inside my shirt by a few strips of flesh. i could not feel it.”

As they loaded her into an ambulance, Assata heard two officers asking each other (in an eerie echo of Fred Hampton's murder), "Is she dead yet?" But Assata didn't die. She was taken to Middlesex General, where she was chained to a cot, stitched up, and charged with murder, attempted murder, armed robbery, and kidnapping. The driver of her car, Sundiata Acoli, was captured a few hours later, hiding in scrubby woods close to the Turnpike.

A police officer was now dead. Assata had been badly hurt and arrested. Sundiata was in custody. And there was another terrible revelation to come. "The room is dark," Assata wrote in her autobiography, "but there is some light. My eyes slowly adjust. There's something lying next to me. i can see an outline. Something in plastic. Something—my mind slowly realizes that it is a man in a plastic bag. And that the man is Zayd."

Assata's closest friend—Zayd Shakur, the man I'm named after—had been found lying near the abandoned Pontiac, shot several times and left to die in a ditch. "Never in my life have I felt such grief," Assata wrote. "Zayd had vowed to protect me and to help me to get to a safe place, and it was clear that he had lost his life trying to protect me."

In the BLA, people practically expected to be arrested or killed. But Zayd wasn't a soldier; he wasn't even underground. He was a member of the aboveground support network—an unarmed civilian, though traveling with a wanted fugitive—and his comrades were shaken by his death.

"It broke my heart," Jamal told me, "because Zayd was not an angry person. Zayd wasn't in the military wing of the Black Panther Party."

"It hit hard," agreed Sekou Odinga. "Hit real hard, because Zayd was a very close comrade of mine, and I considered him my brother."

Two weeks later, the Weather Underground offered its own response: a dynamite bomb exploded inside a bathroom in the 103rd Precinct police headquarters in Queens. No one was hurt in the explosion, and this time the bombing didn't even make the national news. But in an accompanying communiqué, the Weather Underground dedicated the attack to "Zayd Shakur: Black warrior, former minister of information of the New York Black Panther Party, killed by New Jersey state troopers."

It was the first time my parents, in their own strange way, set out to memorialize their friend, Zayd Malik Shakur. The second would be my birth, just a few years later.

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Part 5

Children in My Mind

People have been experimenting with everything about their lives. They have learned how to survive together in the poisoned cities and how to live on the road and the land. They've moved to the country and found new ways to bring up free wild children.

—The Weather Underground, "New Morning" communiqué

Me and my cousins Haydee and Amilcar Dohrn-Melendez hiding out on an Oregon commune, c. 1979.

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Free Wild Children

(Alderson, West Virginia, 1979)

Sometime around 1978 or 1979, my parents took me on my first camping trip, to Alderson, West Virginia. I was still barely a toddler, and my memories of that trip are hazy and impressionistic, mostly based on stories I heard later. But I still remember it as a fun few weeks—pitching a tent in the back of our truck, cooking on a Coleman stove, and lying outside on a blanket in the grass at night, my parents on either side of me, looking up at the stars.

I had no idea what we were doing there, or what had brought our little family to this lonely rural outpost in West Virginia. I was too young yet to read the *Rand McNally Road Atlas* and had no sense of geography, or even time and space. In my mind, West Virginia could just as easily have been California. Or Maine. Or Mars.

My parents never told me the real purpose of our trip—and I wouldn't have understood it even if they had. But as I've learned recently, my family's presence in Alderson that month was no coincidence. "Family on a camping trip" was just a cover story. That fun outing from my childhood was a fiction. Because, as I retraced our path through the underground as part of the research for this book, I noticed something odd about that particular dot on the map.

The Federal Prison Camp at Alderson looks a bit like a small liberal arts college, a quaint campus of red brick buildings nestled in the rolling green hills of Appalachia. It was founded in 1927 as the first all-female federal prison in the United States; inmates since have included Manson girl Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, Puerto Rican independence fighter Lolita Lebrón, and legendary jazz singer Billie Holiday, who was locked up briefly at Alderson in 1947 for possession of narcotics. Much later, in 2005,

Martha Stewart's stay at Alderson would earn it the tabloid nickname Camp Cupcake.

But in 1978 and 1979, when my family took our camping trip, FPC Alderson was best-known for one particular inmate: BLA figurehead Assata Shakur, the NYPD's young bandit queen, who had been transferred from Yardville, New Jersey, as authorities searched for a permanent facility to hold their most high-profile, high-risk female inmate.

"We were approached by people from the Black Liberation Army," Bill admitted, when I pointed out to him the "coincidence" of our vacation at Alderson. "So, Bernardine and I—and you—went on a camping trip. And we camped very near the prison. We took a lot of pictures of the prison, we spent a lot of time watching it, seeing, learning the geography, the landscape, the roads, and so on. Drawing maps and trying to figure out if there was a way to get Assata out. There was a sense that a couple of young white people with a baby could do anything without attracting any attention. So we did that because we were asked to do it. And because we thought it was a noble thing to do."

I asked him whether they ever thought about the dangers of bringing a toddler along on a trip to scout a jailbreak. "Did you worry?" I asked. "I mean, I'd already been born. So, participating in something like that must have been—"

"Well, you volunteered," he interrupted. "So, you can't blame it on me."

This was meant to be a joke, but I didn't laugh, and he recalibrated. "No, we weren't . . . I mean, we weren't breaking any laws at that point, right? What we were doing was casing a prison—"

"But that's gotta be illegal."

"I'm not sure. Is casing illegal? I mean, I guess it is. But I hadn't thought of it that way. The way we thought of it was that we were asked to do it, it was something we could do that was zero to minor risk, and it would be potentially very useful. We felt not only that it would be of assistance to the Black Liberation Army, but that the world would be better if Assata weren't in prison. So, we did it for them. And we did it for ourselves."

This is only the first of the big surprises I uncovered about Assata's connection to my family, and the multiple ways her influence shaped my parents' lives and mine. And it contradicts the story I'd always been told as a child: that even though we were still on the run, my parents had given up

on fighting the government after I was born; that they had, for my sake and my brother's, stopped risking their freedom and safety after they decided to build a family.

The origin story in our family—like all families, we had our own founding myths—was that my birth had changed everything. Our parents, we were always told, had dedicated their young lives to the movement. They'd broken laws, given up on promising futures, lost friends and lovers, and become fugitives, all to end the war, fight racism, and try to build a better world. But after I was born, that imagined future changed. After they had kids, they told us, they gave up on political violence. They stopped bombing buildings and breaking people out of jail. They started making plans to surface—to focus on being parents first. They told us they had committed themselves, out of love for us, to a different kind of future.

But of course, like all origin stories, this one is largely a myth. Because as it turns out, Bill and Bernardine were still desperate to be part of something larger than themselves. Larger than their relationship. Larger, even, than our family. And that camping trip to Alderson would be the first, but not the last, time they chose to try to help Assata and their Black comrades in the underground, even if it meant risking the safety of our family.

* * *

That camping trip to West Virginia was also the first time I met another Weather Kid—a child, like me, born in the underground. Weather fugitives Jeff Jones and his new partner, Eleanor Stein, met us at the campground near Alderson with their son, Thai, who quickly became my closest—and, for a time, only—friend.

Weather Kids: Me on the left, Thai on the right.

This was, like most friendships, partly a matter of context—we didn't have much of a social life back then, and I rarely, if ever, got to play with kids my own age. But it was also a friendship based on shared perspective and experience: Thai and I had both grown up on the run, moving all the time, living under assumed names (his was Timmy and mine was Z).

Perhaps not coincidentally, we were both quiet, solitary, slightly dreamy kids, and we hit it off right away; we read (and wrote) comic books together, visited arcades when we could beg a few quarters from our parents for Ms. Pac Man or Burger Time. We embarked on long Dungeons & Dragons campaigns, making up elaborate stories and adventures about our fantasy alter egos—partly to explain, and maybe partly to escape, the strangeness of our day-to-day lives. Both of us, perhaps not coincidentally, later became writers.

Over the years, I also met other kids from the underground—the sons and daughters of Weathermen and Black Panthers, of Young Lords and Puerto Rican separatists, of "back to the land" hippies and eco-radicals. We stayed, for a while, at a commune in Oregon called Magic Forest Farm, where I met a whole community of kids born, like me, off the grid, living on a plot of land their parents had founded as a kind of eco-utopia, supposedly free from the racism, sexism, classism, and environmental destruction of American society. We played together in a waterfall everyone called "the washing machine," scrounged our meals by picking fruit and vegetables from the garden, and learned how to milk the cow (named, naturally, Emma Goldmilk).

The grown-ups mostly left us alone on the Farm. It was an article of faith on the commune that kids were naturally, inherently good—that we

could be left to our own devices and trusted to find our way to adulthood, that raising us free from grown-up interference and the corruption of modern society was itself a revolutionary act.

That idea—that having children was revolutionary—had become a central idea in the underground before I was even born.

"People have been experimenting with everything about their lives," my mother wrote in her "New Morning" communiqué a few years before my birth. "They have learned how to survive together in the poisoned cities and how to live on the road and the land. They've moved to the country and found new ways to bring up free wild children. People are forming new families both to live together and to organize and fight together . . . It's a new nation that will grow out of the struggles of the next year."

Bill and Bernardine with me (on my mom's lap) and other kids on an Oregon commune.

This idea, it turns out, like most of the political philosophy of the Weather Underground, had its roots in the Black freedom struggle and the Black underground. I didn't realize it at the time, but Assata Shakur hadn't just brought me and Thai to Alderson—she was also, in a strange way, what had brought us into the world in the first place. Because, just as my mother and her friends had followed Fred Hampton into his coalition of cross-racial solidarity, and followed Eldridge Cleaver and the Panther 21 into their

militant war against the FBI and the NYPD, in the mid-1970s Bernardine had found a new Black revolutionary role model to emulate.

My mother would now follow Assata Shakur into the next stage of their parallel radical lives—a period that wound up being, unexpectedly, all about children.

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We Decided We Were Going to Live

(Rikers Island, 1973)

i'm not letting these parasites, these oppressors, these greedy racist swine make me kill my children in my mind, before they're even born.

—Assata Shakur

JoAnne Chesimard a.k.a. Assata Shakur, age twenty-six, arrives at Morris County jail, December 28, 1973.

After the New Jersey Turnpike shooting, Assata was held in solitary confinement at Rikers Island, in the so-called psycho ward. She was tried by an all-white jury, convicted of killing New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster, and sentenced to life in prison. And it was there, during her trial, after more than two years behind bars, that Assata discovered she was pregnant.

This was a big surprise, to the rest of the world if not to the expectant mom herself. Like Bernardine, Assata had always fiercely rejected the

subservient role forced upon women by American society. “I’m a revolutionary,” she once said. “I don’t have time to sit at home and make no babies.” But something in her thinking had apparently changed.

“She conceived me in prison,” Assata’s daughter Kakuya Shakur told me, laughing, years later. “It took me a long time to figure out, how could that possibly happen? As a kid, I’m like, Really? How? But, yes.”

Assata, it turns out, had shared a locked cell off the courtroom during her trial with another defendant, BLA soldier Kamau Sidiki (born Freddie Hilton), and the closeness of their quarters, along with the life-or-death stakes of their predicament, had apparently engendered its own brand of outlaw intimacy.

“The subject of sex came up,” Assata later recalled in a documentary interview. “And we thought about it, and we talked about it, and it was really heavy. It was a heavy, heavy thing . . . Because we said, ‘How can we even think about bringing a child into this world?’ I mean, the world is a terrible, terrible place . . . But then I thought about my mother. My grandmother. My great-great-great-grandmothers. And what they must have thought about as slaves bringing life into this world. And we just decided that we were going to live, you know?”

Assata’s pregnancy sparked a tabloid sensation in the media, and a scramble by authorities to evade responsibility. Morris County sheriff Arnold Ladd flatly denied it was even possible to become pregnant in his jail, while Correction Commissioner Benjamin Malcolm claimed Assata had been guarded at all times by U.S. marshals and kept in strict isolation. “If she had any visitors,” he insisted, “they conferred through a glass partition.”

When the FBI opened an investigation into this apparently miraculous conception, Assata’s response was characteristically fierce. “Well, they better not try to come ’round asking no questions,” she wrote. “I’ll tell them that this baby was sent by the Black creator to liberate Black people. I’ll tell him that this baby is the new Black messiah, conceived in a holy way, come to lead our people to freedom and justice and to create a new Black nation.”

In the end, the government decided not to pursue charges connected to the pregnancy. “There is nothing to investigate,” the prosecutor ruefully concluded, seeming eager to wash his hands of the embarrassing situation. “No crime was committed.”

And so, at perhaps the worst possible time, locked up in the psycho ward at Rikers and facing life in prison, Assata suddenly found herself contemplating a new and unfamiliar possibility—that she was about to become a mother.

"Already, i was deeply in love with this child," she wrote in her autobiography. "Already, i talked to it and worried about it and wondered how it was feeling and what it was thinking . . . It has always intrigued me how the world can be so beautiful and so ugly at the same time."

Assata wasn't alone in this new way of thinking. All at once, around the spring of 1973, it seems many of the women in the revolutionary undergrounds had "children in their minds." They were approaching their thirties, and despite their radical break from their parents and society, the pull of both culture and biology was apparently strong.

My mother's sister, my aunt Jennifer, learned she was pregnant around the same time as Assata. "I was ecstatic," she told me. "Ecstatic to be having a baby. No matter what else was going on. Our view was we may be jailed and who knows what will happen to us, but people will raise our baby, and we have to have a baby."

Jennifer was studying to be a midwife at the time, and she was asked by the BLA to help Assata prepare for her own birth in prison—another surprising example of the intimate solidarity between Black and white revolutionary undergrounds. "Here we are, both with these eight-month-pregnant bellies," Jennifer remembers, "a glass barrier between us. And we just started from the beginning: What is the first stage in labor? What does a contraction feel like? We were in two opposite worlds in a way, but we [also] weren't. You can create enormous walls, physical walls, but they can't stop that—people connecting. And it's a lifeline."

Jennifer's son, my cousin Amilcar, was born on August 19, 1973. A few weeks later, on September 11 at 4 a.m., Assata gave birth to her own daughter, Kakuya Shakur, at Elmhurst Hospital in Queens, while still chained to her gurney. Authorities let Assata breastfeed her baby for a few days, then put her in an ambulance and brought her back to Rikers alone. When she refused examination in the infirmary and tried to walk out, insisting on seeing her newborn again, the guards beat her, chained her to the stretcher, and threw her back into solitary.

"I was with my daughter for a week before they sent me back to the prison," Assata later recalled in an interview. "That was one of the most

difficult periods of my life, that separation. I had to just block it out; otherwise, I think I might have gone insane."

* * *

Assata wasn't the only Black revolutionary having children. Around the same time, another female fugitive in the BLA (nobody would tell me this woman's name) was also pregnant, and needed a safe place to give birth. So, while Jennifer gave breathing lessons to Assata at Rikers, Bernardine and her friend Eleanor Stein, who were still a few years from having their own kids (me and Thai), signed on to help.

Unlike Jennifer, Bernardine and Eleanor didn't know anything about obstetrics or midwifery. They were just trying to be good comrades to a fellow fugitive. "The BLA was under tremendous attack and surveillance," Eleanor told me. "And people were getting killed . . . She [the BLA fugitive] didn't want to go to the hospital. She felt vulnerable. She *was* vulnerable. And so, like complete lunatics, we said, 'Great, we'll do it.'"

The two Weatherwomen rented a quaint colonial house in upstate New York, stocked it with food and books, and smuggled the pregnant fugitive inside. The soon-to-be-mother, my mom remembers, seemed "private and scared." She didn't talk much. "You know, everything about it was—weird."

"It was supposed to be for a two-week period," Eleanor says. "And so we had this plan. It made perfect sense, if you were not looking at the details. But the two weeks came and went, and it became clear that the calculation of her due date was off by a month."

For weeks, these three outlaws, two white and one Black, lived together as roommates, cooking food, doing laundry, practicing breathing exercises—the solidarity of the underground in its most close, familial form. My mom spent most of that time reading birthing books. She had quickly realized she was unqualified to do the job, but she couldn't back out now—she had already volunteered. "I felt we were way in over our heads," she admits. "It was terrifying. Terrifying."

Still, when the time came, the laboring mother was brave and stoic, and the two amateur midwives managed to deliver the child safely. For the first time in her life, Bernardine actually held a newborn in her arms. "It was a great, normal birth," she told me, still sounding relieved decades later. "We

were there. She was fine. And who knows where that kid is now. But that kid is you."

"That kid is you" is a strange thing to say—I wasn't sure I heard it correctly at first and had to listen to the tape a few times to be sure. But when I asked about it, my mom just laughed and said she meant it metaphorically. She waved aside my attempts to explain the metaphor, but I think what she was trying to say is that this was the first moment she truly imagined having a child of her own—that this underground birth was the beginning of her own transformation to becoming a mother, even if only in her imagination.

And also, maybe, that I share some kind of secret identity with that nameless kid—babies born into the underground. Children who didn't get to choose our own beginning—though what kid ever does?—but who carry a common legacy. A shared inheritance. And if we were to meet each other today, all these years later, we might still have a shared understanding, some way of recognizing each other, a secret code.

I am Marion Delgado.

* * *

In 1973, the FBI quietly took Bernardine off their Ten Most Wanted list. Embarrassed by their inability to capture her, U.S. law enforcement officials now wanted to deemphasize the woman who had once been their top priority. "Bernardine Rae Dohrn, although still a federal fugitive, is no longer one of the FBI's 'Ten Most Wanted Fugitives,'" the new director wrote in a terse memo to his special agents. "Make certain that your publicity outlets are promptly notified of this fact."

The Bureau was having problems of its own; two years earlier, a group of activists had broken into a regional FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania, and made off with classified documents exposing the Bureau's illegal COINTELPRO surveillance program. By 1973, the FBI was in full-blown legal and political crisis, scrambling to avoid indictments and congressional hearings. In case after case, judges now required the Bureau "to disclose whether it had used burglaries, sabotage, electronic surveillance, agents provocateurs, or other 'espionage techniques' against the Weatherman."

Of course, the FBI couldn't do this without revealing their own lawbreaking—the unconstitutional burglaries and wiretaps, the warrantless

searches and black bag jobs—and, under scrutiny from federal judges, their cases started to fall apart. On January 3, 1974, U.S. District Court Judge Julius J. Hoffman dismissed a series of indictments against the Weather fugitives, acting "on a government request which noted that a recent Supreme Court decision barring electronic surveillance without a court order would have hampered prosecution of the case."

That June, all remaining federal conspiracy charges against my mom were dismissed. She was still wanted on state charges in Illinois stemming from the Days of Rage riots, but most of her federal charges simply went away, no longer viable due to pervasive government misconduct.

The FBI hadn't fully given up their search, but the Bureau's slow-motion implosion from the COINTELPRO scandal marked the end of any focused nationwide hunt for the Weather Underground fugitives. For the remainder of the 1970s, internal FBI memos seem more concerned with shifting blame, or bemoaning the agents and officials taken down in the scandal, than doing anything useful to track their targets.

In 1974, the Associated Press went down to Florida again, to see how Barney and Dorothy were feeling now that their daughter was no longer a Most Wanted fugitive. The article painted a sympathetic portrait of loving parents who "never give up hope that one day she will come home," and of Barney as an American Gothic-type figure ("as he sits in a rocking chair at his home in a retirement community"). "You don't get used to it," my grandfather told the AP reporter. "The hurt doesn't wear off. I hope someday she'll be home. These are our golden years, and certainly we should be able to enjoy our children."

The article concluded, with all the shell-shocked bewilderment characteristic of people in the 1970s looking back at the previous turbulent decade, that Barney "cannot explain why Bernardine was attracted to the revolutionary movement, but guesses it was the climate of the times."

The zeitgeist was shifting once again. The tumult of the Sixties now seemed like it had happened ages ago. Even the FBI was ready to move on. My parents, who for years had been certain they would be dead or locked up by the time they turned thirty, even as they finally reached that three-decade milestone suddenly found themselves confronting a strange new idea: that they might actually have a future.

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Sunflower

(The Bay, 1974–75)

Look for the girl with the sun in her eyes
And she's gone

—The Beatles, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds"

Delia Cunningham, a.k.a. Sunflower, Bay Area, c. 1975.

No matter what was happening with her friends and allies, my mother still resisted the idea of having a family herself. "My determination to never be pregnant was a determination to not be *my* mother," she told me. "Not be like most women I'd grown up seeing. And I had managed that in a certain bizarre way."

But that year, Bernardine started spending time with a girl—the daughter of a close friend—an eight-year-old hippie kid in San Francisco named Delia Cunningham, whose underground name was Sunflower. "It wasn't my idea," Delia told me, still sounding amused and a bit embarrassed by the memory. "I already had a weird name. I was asked what I would want my name to be, and had some conventional—'Could I be

Janet?' I mean, Sunflower? What more hippie name could you come up with?"

Delia's parents, Dennis and Mona Cunningham, were both teachers and artists, founding members of Chicago's legendary Second City theater. They were also radical sympathizers; Dennis was a lawyer who had co-founded the People's Law Office in Chicago, helping to represent Fred Hampton in 1968; Mona had attended the Flint War Council in 1969 and had even named one of her daughters Bernadine (without the second r) as a tribute to her personal revolutionary hero.

Then, in the early 1970s, Mona suddenly left her husband, took her four kids, and moved halfway across the country to join the Weather Underground—just picked up and left, as if they were running away to join the circus. "She wanted to be a revolutionary," Bill told me. "She didn't want to be on the sidelines. She'd been a mother, a wife, now she was free, and she was gonna overthrow the government. She was very feisty, very funny, and she had a lot of anarchist in her. But she wanted to be a disciplined revolutionary and overthrow the government. That's what she wanted."

Mona was by all accounts a magnetic figure, a bohemian actress with her own brand of counterculture cachet. She introduced the Weatherpeople to artist friends in LA, some of whom had become B-list Hollywood stars, and convinced the actors to donate money to the underground cause and to let fugitives crash in their celebrity mansions (careful not to ask too many questions about the true identities of their overnight guests). Mona even volunteered her own children as props—part of the underground disguise. So, if, for example, Bernardine and Jeff needed to scope out a potential target for a bombing, they could bring Sunflower along and they would seem more like a respectable all-American family, out for a stroll.

"We were beards," Delia told me. "That was the word. I would go to meet your mom by myself. My mother said to me, 'Okay, well now, we have a new thing that we're going to do, and it's called a trajectory, and you're going to follow this path, and people are going to watch you to make sure you're not being followed. And someone will come.

Which, when you think about it, is pretty irresponsible. Pretty risky. But it was all apparently sanctioned, even encouraged, by her mother. And Delia says she didn't really mind. "I don't remember being frightened," she told me. "I think we weirdly felt protected. Like, the grown-ups have it, you

know? They've got it sorted out. I just have to remember my part. There's nothing you have to do—except don't tell. I mean, kids keep secrets all the time, right? You should be so lucky that the secrets aren't really, really horrible."

And this rings true to me, somehow—sounds incredibly familiar, in fact—that feeling of being a child in the underground: trusting that the grown-ups must have it, and you just have to remember your role. It's exactly the feeling I had during my own childhood, camping out in West Virginia or hiding in Harlem—that I could rely on the adults to do the right thing. That they had my best interests in mind. And everything would probably work out fine.

So at first, Sunflower was just a part of the cover story: she was pretending to be Bernardine's daughter, and Bernardine was acting as her mom. But somehow—in a big surprise to both—the roleplay gradually started to feel real. Bernardine, who had never much liked being around children, found herself unexpectedly drawn to this quiet, thoughtful child. "It was so much fun with Delia," she told me. "She was so much fun to be with. She never made a mistake about names or clandestine protocol. We just had a fabulous time. She loved being read to. She was charming and flexible and excited about every new thing. I loved her dearly."

I asked Delia about whether "flexible" is the right word for this (some might call such a relationship reckless or exploitative)—an eight-year-old kid dragged around by wanted fugitives as part of an underground disguise, being praised for her "clandestine protocol." But Delia, more than fifty years later, laughed it off. She said it had never bothered her, and that her "flexibility" had become a running joke in her own family; her father used to say, "Delia can dig all scenes."

Delia started staying overnight with Bernardine when her own mother was out of town. They went to movies together—black and white classics starring Fred Astaire, Charlie Chaplin, and the Marx Brothers. They checked out books from the library and read them aloud over tea. They ate in restaurants, just the two of them—an unusual and special treat for Delia at the time, given how focused her own mother was on self-discovery and political self-improvement.

Bernardine quickly became more than a babysitter to Delia, more than a friend. "She and I were really connected," Delia says. "Like, I could talk to

her. She was really a refuge for me. I think I wished she was my mother. At least sometimes."

Bernardine apparently shared Delia's wish. "For me, it was a transitional moment," she told me. "Sunflower opened my heart and confidence about loving children. I thought, Oh my god, this is not just the nightmare it looks like from other people's lives. This is absolutely fun and wonderful."

In letters to friends around this time, Bernardine started referring to Delia as "the daughter."

* * *

The Weather Underground's war on the U.S. government raged on. On January 29, 1975, a little after 1 a.m., a call came into the switchboard at the *New York Times*; a woman's voice identified herself as a fugitive member of the Weather Underground and said a bomb was about to explode in the State Department building, in response to the U.S. government's "war and aggression in Vietnam."

A few minutes later, that bomb went off—the now-familiar pattern—wrecking a third-floor restroom, destroying twenty or thirty offices, ripping through an elevator shaft and plumbing system, and flooding the floors below, causing more than $350,000 in damage.

"It's a shambles," a State Department spokesman said at a hastily convened press conference. "Pipes hanging loose, walls sort of caved in . . ."

Secretary of state Henry Kissinger—the architect of the bombing campaign in Vietnam and Cambodia—called the attack on Foggy Bottom "a totally senseless act."

The aftermath of the Weather Underground bombing of the State Department, January 1975.

The next day, a wave of new bomb threats lit up the switchboards of newspapers and TV stations across the country, targeting CIA headquarters, the Pentagon, the Department of Justice, the Secret Service, and the navy. One caller claiming to speak for the Weather Underground warned that dozens of government buildings would "go up in smoke in half an hour."

Nearly six thousand government employees were evacuated from their offices, but no bombs were ever found. Once again, the calls were copycat efforts from people eager to participate, even by symbolic association, in an attack against Kissinger's State Department and the Nixon administration, or just drawn to the Weather Underground's anti-establishment rage. But as it turned out, that explosion at the State Department would mark a final turning point in the five-year bombing campaign. It was not quite the last, but the last *significant* action ever claimed by the Weather Underground.

Three months later, on April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon. Panicked American diplomats and South Vietnamese fought one another on the roof of the American embassy to board helicopters and flee the capital ahead of the advancing communist troops. It was the end of the twenty-year-long conflict in Vietnam.

The Weathermen, of course, were thrilled with the news. The future they'd been fighting for, for years—not just a ceasefire, but an actual Viet Cong victory—had finally happened.

"We used to chant, 'Right on, take Saigon' or 'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh. The NLF is gonna win,'" Weatherman Jeff Jones told a documentary crew

that week. “Who believed it? Who could have believed it? It just happened . . . The victory in Vietnam is a victory for the American people, and we certainly identify it as a victory for ourselves. It’s something we fought for ten years.”

Of course, the Weather Underground couldn’t take credit for the war’s end, as my mother readily admits. “We didn’t win the war,” she told me. “The Vietnamese won the war.” But in the giddy euphoria of April 1975, anyone even tangentially associated with the antiwar movement could feel that they’d played a small part in bringing an end to the bloodshed. And it seemed, at least for a moment, as if anything was possible.

“If you understand what happened in the Vietnamese war and why the Vietnamese defeated the United States,” Bernardine told a documentary crew interviewing her and Jeff and Bill for the film that would eventually become Emile de Antonio’s *Underground*, “it makes the possibility and the inevitability of revolution in the United States very clear. The United States government is *not* invincible. It didn’t exist for all time and it’s not going to exist for all time. And that lesson is a very powerful lesson. That lesson is an *explosive* lesson.”

Her bombing campaign wasn’t quite over. A few weeks later, the Weather Underground blew up a Banco de Ponce branch in Rockefeller Center, to show their solidarity with striking cement workers in Puerto Rico. A few months after that, an explosion went off at the Kennecott Copper Corporation, as retribution for the company’s involvement in a coup in Chile.

These attacks were aimed at institutions of American imperialism and global capital—part of the Weather Underground’s long-term commitment to be in solidarity with international anti-imperialist movements—but they didn’t have the moral clarity or political cachet of, say, bombing the Pentagon or NYPD headquarters. And they were met with a kind of collective cultural shrug; the attacks barely made headlines. Without the galvanizing force of opposing the war, the Underground had become rudderless, a resistance in search of something to resist.

“I think a lot of people warned us,” my mom admits, “older people, that [the end of the war] was going to disrupt the organization. We were like, ‘Oh, no, for us, race and class is the whole thing too!’ and blah, blah, blah. We were arrogant. We thought we’d last forever.”

Despite Bernardine's earlier bravado about the "inevitability of revolution in the United States," by the mid-1970s it was clear to most observers, if not yet to the Weatherpeople themselves, that the peak revolutionary moment had already passed. In just a few years, the pendulum would swing hard in the other direction, toward Reagan, Wall Street, *Rambo*, the War on Drugs, and the era of mass incarceration.

In any case, as the Vietnam War came to an end, Bernardine found herself thinking more and more about the future. "Maybe it was turning thirty," she told me. "Maybe it was that my sister had children, I don't know . . . I don't have a simple answer, or even a complicated answer. I don't have an answer. I was so adamant until that moment. I was really sure—*that wasn't going to be me*. And suddenly it was me. I don't really know how to explain it."

I don't honestly think it's that hard to explain. My mom had been a rebel in her twenties—more rebellious than most—and like many young women of the era, she'd been determined not to have kids herself. But now she was getting older, growing up. And being a mother apparently seemed appealing in a new way.

She and Bill decided it was time to change the terms of their relationship. "We were on Cape Cod," my dad remembers, "and we had a retreat of a few days. And it was around that time that we decided we were a couple."

This was a bit like getting engaged, for normal people—but there was no proposal, no ring. Their partnership had been gradual, and unconventional, and so was their romance. They had already known each other for years—as co-conspirators, friends, and even occasional lovers. "But certainly, for the first year," my mom says, "maybe two years or maybe even three years, we were not monogamous. We were not planning a future together."

Still, they spoke on the phone almost every day whenever they were traveling, checking in on each other from the road. Over time, they started to realize they depended on each other for counsel and emotional support.

"There was something about that first year or two, when being friends was so important," Bill told me. "Falling in love is a state of temporary madness, but for us, it was the friendship that was underneath the madness that was telling and critical."

As they grew up together, my parents started to sense that they shared not only political goals but something more fundamental, long-term, and personal. Their closest friends were making new lives, starting families. Bernardine's sister Jennifer had a child. People in the Black Liberation Army were building families. Even in prison, Assata Shakur had become a mom.

"I don't feel like I had a void in my life," my mom told me, "or that something was terribly missing . . . I'm sure there's a horrible psychiatric or biological explanation somewhere. I just felt like it would change us, but it would change us in a good way."

Bernardine, as usual, took the decisive step. "I want to have a baby," she told Bill one day. "Let's have a baby." And he said, "Sure. What took you so long?"

My mom found out she was pregnant at the Haight-Ashbury free clinic in San Francisco. Home pregnancy tests were not yet widely available, so she had to risk showing up at the clinic in person—handing over an ID with a fake name, peeing in a cup, then calling for the results a few days later. The nurse on the line sounded apologetic as she broke the news; most unmarried women visiting an alternative clinic in those days were eager for a negative result. "I'm really sorry to tell you this," the nurse said. "But you're pregnant."

My mom, however, was ecstatic. "Ahhhhhhh! That's so wonderful!" she remembers saying.

That fall, she and Bill rented a scruffy apartment near the beach, overlooking a park, and started nesting. They bought bags of thrifted baby clothes and decorated the apartment with cheap wall hangings and stuffed toys. They had almost no money and no family they could invite to a baby shower, so my "crib" was a dresser drawer, pulled out and lined with quilts and blankets. Over my "nursery" hung pictures of Che Guevara, Malcolm X, and Ho Chi Minh.

But there was a humming tension underneath this sense of cheerful expectation. Because even as she prepared to be a new mother, optimistically thinking about her new family and new future, the organization Bernardine had helped build was falling apart.

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The Revolution Eats Its Children

(San Francisco, 1976–77)

The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: Now is the time of monsters.
—Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*

Bernardine, pregnant with me, at the Golden Gate Bridge, underground, 1977.

By 1977, most of the charges against the Weather Underground had been dropped. After almost a decade on the run, plea deals were finally within reach. Jeff Jones, Bernardine's ex-boyfriend and co-leader of the California group, started arguing that the members of the organization were no longer doing much good as fugitives, that they should make plans to surface, strike deals with the government, and return to aboveground political work. He called this new strategy "inversion"—as in flipping something upside down and bringing the underground up to the surface.

My parents agreed. They no longer felt useful as fugitives; Bernardine was pregnant, and they were both eager to begin a new life. But even as the original leaders of the Weather Bureau—Bernardine, Bill, Jeff, and a few close friends—made plans to surface and start building their families, a vocal new contingent within the group, who called themselves the Revolutionary Committee, pushed back.

These insurgent Weatherpeople were mostly young, lower-level cadres, without much authority or visibility either inside or outside the group. But in the oddly inverted hierarchy of a leftist organization committed to toppling existing power structures, their lack of status actually strengthened their argument; they claimed they were, in fact, the oppressed, the marginalized, the powerless, and therefore the true representatives of the revolutionary vanguard.

On every phone call and at every meeting—in the diners and safehouses and public parks where Weatherpeople gathered to talk—these young dissidents pressed their argument: that Jeff's inversion strategy was a mistake and a betrayal of the revolution; that the Weather leaders, now mostly in their mid-thirties, had become hopelessly compromised, middle-aged and middle-class. A violent white resistance, they argued, was still relevant, still necessary—more so than ever, given what was happening to the Black Liberation Army in New York.

"Well, wait a minute," Weatherwoman Kathy Boudin remembers thinking. "There's nothing fundamentally changed with Black people's experience in this country, and U.S. imperialism exists in other countries, not just Vietnam, and there's a need for an underground. And if you decide to go aboveground, you're being racist." Her partner, David Gilbert, agreed. "There's a history of predominantly white movements in the U.S. starting out [planning to follow] the Black liberation movement," he told me. "But then getting into, 'Oh, our white organization will lead the revolution.' And I think for all the courage and brilliance of the Weather Underground, we had slid in that direction, and there had to be a break from that."

Once again, the group splintered into factions—a repeat of the '69 SDS convention and the founding of Weatherman itself. Only this time, Bernardine and Bill found themselves, ironically, on the older, more moderate side.

The members of the Revolutionary Committee were mostly still in their twenties or even younger; they had come of age within the movement, and

were more inclined than earlier generations of activists to what we would now call identity politics; in fact, many of the young Committee members identified as feminist and/or queer, though the group's leader, in another strange historical irony, was a sixty-one-year-old straight white guy, a former Communist Party member named Clayton Van Lydegraf.

Van Lydegraf was born in 1915—an entirely different generation from the mostly baby-boomer Weathermen. He fought in World War II, became a Communist during the Cold War, and lived through the McCarthy witch hunts. He joined Progressive Labor in the 1960s before being purged from SDS for being too "ultraleft," and when the Weathermen finally found him, in 1969, he was a washed-up old Maoist working as a refrigerator repairman in Seattle, sporting a crew cut and coveralls—the very picture of the downtrodden, long-suffering proletariat.

J.J. (John Jacobs), who was co-leading Weatherman with Bernardine at the time, was impressed by Van Lydegraf's working-class "authenticity" and recruited him into the group. The mechanically-inclined refrigerator repairman soon became Weather's handyman and jack of all trades: fixing cars, sourcing explosives, building timers, even driving the truck and camper that picked up Timothy Leary during the prison break of 1970.

Van Lydegraf was never part of the central Weather Bureau—he was a low-level cadre, not a leader—but his long history of sectarian infighting made him perfectly suited, in 1977, to the bare-knuckle ideological brawls consuming the organization. And when Van Lydegraf took over the Revolutionary Committee, the purity tests and self-criticism sessions that had always been part of the Weather Machine kicked into high gear. Only this time, the primary target—because she was the group's leader and most visible symbol—was my mother.

Van Lydegraf and his Revolutionary Committee started meeting with Bernardine every week, at a safehouse in San Francisco, for a series of intense, focused criticism/self-criticism sessions, to delve into her shortcomings as a leader and her need to take responsibility for the failures of the revolution. "There were only two or three people ever at a given time," my mom told me. "It wasn't a group, maybe just two. And they wanted a couple of things: to take me apart, which they did. And to get contacts that we had with [the Black underground], which they didn't."

The Revolutionary Committee started by accusing Bernardine of opportunism, latent white supremacy, and male chauvinism. They charged

Jeff and Bill—as straight white guys—with being hostile to the burgeoning feminist and gay liberation struggles, and claimed that the entire Weather Bureau had become hopelessly racist, homophobic, and sexist—never mind that the Weather Underground was led by a woman. "On the backs of women who were wasted and excluded from the revolution," they wrote, "Dohrn ascended, and was put forward by Ayers and Jones as a leader of women . . . Dohrn sought to destroy the women's movement as a threat to the male supremacists who guaranteed her power. She traded her history of principled support for national liberation struggles and the fight to build armed struggle in the oppressor nation for what seemed to be a guaranteed position at the head of the revolution."

Day after day, six months pregnant, isolated from friends and family, Bernardine sat through these grueling criticism/self-criticism sessions, denounced by former friends and comrades as a counter-revolutionary, accused of the worst thought crimes she could imagine. I asked her why she didn't just walk away—why would she agree to submit to this humiliating ritual of self-abnegation? After all, she wasn't being dragged to these meetings, or held there by force; why not simply refuse to participate?

"I don't really remember," she admitted quietly. "But you know, it was . . . it was personal. It was about how I dressed and how I . . . Whatever. That I was self-serving and privileged. It's stripping away skin and then bone until you feel like . . . You don't know who you are, and *maybe they're right*. It's a combination of challenging what you did and what you said with who you are in some fundamental way. And you can see it with what's happening right now in the movement. Cancellation. Calling people out. When that takes over—the certainty: We're right and everybody else is wrong. It's horrible, isn't it?"

Finally, Bernardine broke down. Like many revolutionaries in China and the Soviet Union—like J.J.'s literary hero Rubashov in *Darkness at Noon*—she agreed to denounce her friends, and herself. She says she doesn't remember exactly what she said in the sessions; she's blocked it out, and didn't want to remember anyway.

"It would have been terrible," she told me. "I probably said . . . whatever they wanted me to say."

She did. I found it. The Revolutionary Committee released an audio recording of my mom's "confession," which sounds, all these years later, like an eerie echo of her 1970 Declaration of War. Only this time, the war

wasn't with the police, or the government, or even white supremacy, but with her closest friends—and herself.

> Hello, this is Bernardine Dohrn. I am making this tape to acknowledge, repudiate and denounce the counter-revolutionary politics and direction of the Weather Underground Organization.
>
> Jeff Jones of the central committee initiated and led this strategy. Bill Ayers was the second main leader of the plan.
>
> I have been a token woman, part of the structure of women's leadership which actually served male supremacy. I organized for white supremacist and chauvinist politics. We completely failed to support and organize for the revolutionary struggle of the Black Liberation Army or to oppose the police terror directed against them.
>
> Why did we do this? I don't really know. We followed the classic path of white so-called revolutionaries who sold out the revolution.

Today, my mom is still deeply ashamed of this tape—more critical of herself for her "confession" than any radical action she ever took. More than the Custeristic riots of the Days of Rage. More than her nihilistic Manson shout-out at the Flint War Council. More even than her brief flirtation with deadly violence in the run-up to the townhouse.

"It makes me sick that I wrote that," she told me. "It's so grandiose and horrible and cringing . . . I didn't know what was right in that moment, in that context. I didn't know what I thought. Or who I was."

I told her this didn't sound like her. I know she's not perfect—you can't grow up with someone for decades and not see her flaws—but being unsure of what she believes has never been my mother's problem.

"Not like me," she agreed. "But I went there."

Bernardine's self-criticism was widely distributed by the Revolutionary Committee, first as an audio recording, then as a pamphlet, which was sold at alternative bookstores and leftist political gatherings, and widely passed around the radical counterculture scene until it caught the attention of the mainstream media. "The statements," reported the Associated Press, "which are quietly circulating among leftists, are unusual because bickering within the supersecret group has rarely been allowed to leak out."

To outsiders, especially the FBI agents still nominally tasked with tracking down the Weather Underground fugitives, the whole thing seemed surreal and frankly incomprehensible. "I mean, the Weatherman started to come apart because of certain issues, dealing with the blacks," says special agent Bill Dyson. "What relationship you should have with the blacks. A lot of things about male chauvinism. This was something I could never

understand about the Weather Underground—they kept claiming that the men were chauvinist against the women? And yet, it seemed to me like the women control the organization!"

Today, the disintegration of the Weather Underground feels to me both surprising and depressingly inevitable. Without the moral gravity of opposition to the Vietnam War, and with the cultural zeitgeist shifting against them, the group was isolated and adrift, increasingly vulnerable to the purity tests and infighting that have always afflicted progressive leftist movements. It makes sense to me that the internal tensions in the group had become untenable, though it's still incredible that this internal schism was the final straw that broke the organization.

The Weather Underground had survived the Days of Rage, a fierce police crackdown in Chicago, the townhouse explosion, a nationwide FBI manhunt, and the government's illegal COINTELPRO program. Against the odds, they made it through all that. They had survived. And then they turned around and destroyed themselves.

After she made the tape, Bernardine was no longer useful to the insurgents—who now called themselves, in a weird echo of the Action Faction of eight years earlier, the Revolutionary Action Squad. My mom was simply cut loose and allowed to disappear. "They stopped interrogating me," she says. "And I didn't see them again."

Bernardine was expelled from the organization she had co-founded—denounced and cut off from her friends and allies, which was politically painful. And emotionally devastating.

Delia—Sunflower, the girl Bernardine called "daughter"—wound up on the other side of this factional split. Her mother, Mona, was part of the new Action Squad contingent. And she told Delia that Bernardine—the woman after whom Mona had named her youngest daughter, and whom she had allowed to help raise her eldest—was now an untouchable. An outcast. A counter-revolutionary.

"All I remember is hearing a bunch of words that I never heard before," Delia told me. "Like 'opportunist' and 'adventurist' and all that shit. And feeling like, am I supposed to know what this is? Am I supposed to understand that? Like, do I have to do some homework now? . . . I didn't want to be told bad things about people that I loved."

"The last time I saw [Bernardine], she told me she was pregnant with you, and how excited she was," Delia continued. "And how I was a part of

it. She said, ‘I thought I shouldn’t have kids, but being around you made me want to.’ It was so meaningful to me to hear that, just—‘This is a really important relationship for me. It’s not just important for you.’”

It’s true. Their relationship was more than important to Bernardine—it was essential. It changed her life, and, as it turns out, made my life possible.

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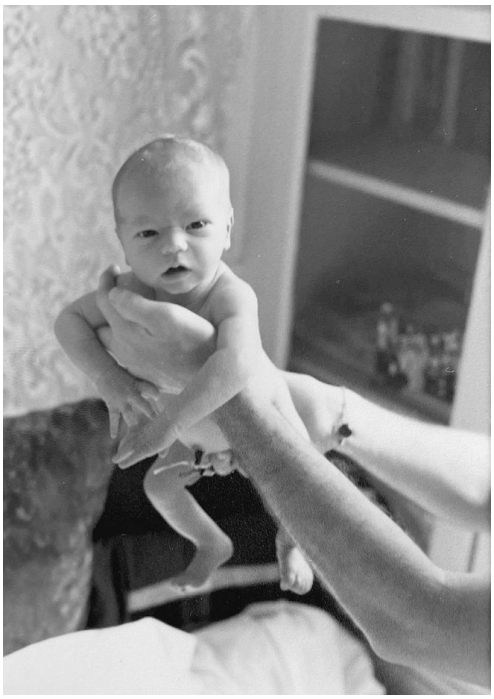
And There You Were

(The Bay, 1977)

The young always inherit the revolution.
—Huey P. Newton



Me, seeming surprised to be born a fugitive, 1977.

On November 19, 1977, a SWAT team burst into a safehouse in Houston, Texas, and swept up four wanted federal fugitives. Inside the safehouse, police found multiple handguns, including a Colt .357 and a Ruger .22, along with several boxes of ammunition, fake IDs, a stockpile of cash, a collection of wigs, and—at an address linked to the group back in LA—hundreds of pounds of explosives.

The people captured that day included Clayton Van Lydegraf and three other members of his Revolutionary Action Squad.

The Squad had tried to be careful, monitoring police radios, venturing out only at night, changing aliases once a week—doing their best imitation of Weather Underground tradecraft. But as they prepared to go underground, to replace the founding members of the Weather Bureau and take up the mantle of clandestine armed struggle, the Squad had been taking trips out to the Mojave Desert for target practice with rifles and handguns, setting off dynamite bombs in the sand, driving go-karts to learn evasive high-speed driving techniques. And they had been accompanied by two guys who seemed tailor-made for paramilitary work: a bearded long-haired army vet named Ralph and an experienced stick-up man they all called Dick.

Van Lydegraf had been won over by the duo's military/criminal backgrounds, working-class bona fides, and obvious enthusiasm for his in-depth discussion of the works of Marx and Mao. But as it turned out, both Ralph and Dick were undercover FBI agents—William D. Reagan and Richard J. Gianotti—and they had been infiltrating the Revolutionary Action Squad for months.

The core of the Weather Bureau—Bill, Bernardine, Jeff, and a few others—had managed to stay underground for almost a decade. They had accomplished this not with sophisticated cloak-and-dagger techniques but because they were a tight-knit group of friends who remained loyal, despite their political disagreements, and because they had the support of allies in the counterculture—they were fish in a much wider sea. Van Lydegraf's Revolutionary Action Squad, on the other hand, with its focus on sectarian insularity, identity politics, and ultra-left orthodoxy, managed to isolate itself from the wider movement—and lasted only a few months before it was thoroughly infiltrated, busted before its members could carry out a single action.

At this point, the Weather Underground Organization, for all practical purposes, ceased to exist. With the Squad busted and Bernardine, Bill, and Jeff ostracized and nowhere to be found, there was no organization left for the FBI to target. Special agent Bill Dyson, who had been put in charge of the SDS wiretaps back in the heady days of 1969–70, was tasked with wrapping up the Bureau's WUO task force.

"I had to write a closing report," he says, "and I did. I said, 'This is it. There's no organization any longer. No reason to continue the investigation.' I got no resistance from headquarters. My case was closed. Was I disappointed? I was disappointed in the sense that I didn't feel I was successful. These people, they did the bombings. I couldn't solve a one. They were fugitives. I couldn't find them. So, you're certainly not gonna pat yourself on the back."

The FBI still had its own internal issues to worry about. On April 29, 1976, the Senate's Church Committee finally released its blockbuster report on "intelligence excesses, at home and abroad," detailing how the Bureau had illegally spied on U.S. citizens in its investigations of Black civil rights leaders and left-wing groups during the 1960s and 1970s, including the Weather Underground. "Intelligence agencies have undermined the constitutional rights of citizens," the report concluded, "primarily because checks and balances designed by the framers of the Constitution to assure accountability have not been applied."

Later that year, Jimmy Carter's election brought in a new Democratic administration, along with a new attorney general determined to air the dirty laundry of the Nixon-era Justice Department. L. Patrick Gray, the acting director who led the FBI after Hoover's death, was criminally indicted, along with deputy director Mark Felt, for their joint role in approving black bag jobs—the illegal break-ins and wiretaps used to hunt the Weather Underground fugitives.

The FBI's willingness to break the law in the hunt for radical groups, it turned out, had metastasized into a much larger willingness to go after anyone the administration considered an enemy, even peaceful political opponents. The black bag jobs used by Hoover against the Weathermen provided the blueprint for Nixon's "plumbers," who raided the Democratic National Committee offices at the Watergate Hotel.

And in yet another historical irony, Mark Felt, the man who helped dream up those illegal COINTELPRO tactics, was simultaneously leaking to *Washington Post* reporters Woodward and Bernstein, as their source "Deep Throat," about Nixon's own illegal surveillance and break-ins, which would eventually lead to the Watergate scandal and to his boss's resignation. But, interviewed on CBS's *Face the Nation* after his indictment, Felt struck a more defiant tone. "I think this is justified and I'd do it again tomorrow," he said. "Somebody has to come forward and stick up for the FBI. It's cheap to

criticize the FBI now. Actually, the FBI is a wonderful organization, a magnificent organization filled with wonderful, wonderful people."

When pressed, Felt admitted that some COINTELPRO tactics had been "extra-legal," but he insisted that it had all been for the greater good. "To not take action against these people and know of a bombing in advance," he said, "would simply be to stick your fingers in your ears and protect your eardrums when the explosion went off."

The courts did not agree. Felt and deputy assistant director Edward S. Miller were both convicted of conspiracy to violate the Constitution—that "they did unlawfully, willfully, and knowingly combine, conspire, confederate, and agree, to injure and oppress citizens of the United States who are relatives and acquaintances of the Weathermen fugitives."

And though history books today often portray this necessary corrective to Nixon's corrupt Justice Department and Hoover's out-of-control FBI as a bipartisan consensus, the Republican Party in fact worked for decades to block any accountability. First, as president, Nixon's former vice president Gerald Ford issued a full and unconditional pardon to his ex-boss in 1974, putting him permanently beyond the reach of prosecution. Then, after President Carter's Justice Department finally went after Nixon's henchmen, securing the convictions of Felt and Miller, incoming president Ronald Reagan pardoned them both within nine days of taking office.

Far from being chastened, the GOP doubled down on Nixon's unconstitutional investigations, corruption, pro-police racism, and War on Drugs—all of which would turn out to be political winners in the Reagan/Bush and Trump eras. And behind the scenes, Republicans worked for decades to bring back into the fold some of their worst authoritarian co-conspirators. Reagan's first nominee to the Supreme Court was Robert Bork, the lawyer who had stepped up to enable Nixon's hostile takeover of the Justice Department following the "Saturday Night Massacre," when Nixon tried to end the Watergate investigation by dismissing special prosecutor Archibald Cox. Bork was the definition of a partisan yes-man willing to use the law, and the vast powers of the Justice Department, to protect his criminal boss. And Nixon's "dirty trickster" Roger Stone would wind up as an adviser to Donald Trump, deeply involved with the insurrection on January 6, 2021.

The political legacy of the 1960s, in other words, was not just civil rights, feminism, gay rights, and the youth counterculture. The equal and

opposite reaction—the backlash—was the institutionalization of white resentment and authoritarian lawbreaking in the modern-day Republican Party.

* * *

My mother wasn't yet aware of any of this. In 1977, she was still underground, cut off from her former organization, pregnant and desperately trying to figure out what to do with her future. She had denounced her partner and her closest friends. Her core identity—as a committed revolutionary—had been shattered.

She was still a fugitive. But she no longer knew why—or what any of it had been for.

"Bernardine was depleted by the whole experience," Bill told me. "A lot of my energy went into propping her up. Into making her feel better. That she wasn't the enemy. That she wasn't a sellout."

My dad had forgiven Bernardine for singling him out in her coerced confession. He was now focused on being a good partner to his pregnant girlfriend, who was clearly suffering. "I remember long walks on the beach," he told me. "I remember long, slow lunches in the park. Taking care of ourselves. Taking care of her. Because she was about to give birth."

On April 26, 1977, Bernardine and Bill and a few close friends gathered in a tiny apartment, along with a midwife they'd met through the California commune scene. They had a truck of medical supplies parked outside in case of complications. "Going to the hospital," my mother says, "was not an option for all the obvious reasons."

"She wasn't worried about the birth," remembers the midwife, Yeshi Neuman. "The main thing she was worried about was her legal situation. I kept reassuring her and saying things were going well, and they were . . . But then at a certain point, things started to slow down."

Bernardine's labor stalled. For more than thirty-six hours, nothing happened. There were no signs of progress. As the night dragged on, my mom says she started to think about her own mother, my grandma Dorothy Dohrn, who had hemorrhaged following her second labor. Bernardine didn't know yet that Barney's first wife had died during childbirth, but it was still terrifying to be in this vulnerable situation, without access to a hospital or

emergency medical care. If anything went wrong, she knew she'd most likely end up in prison, or dead.

"And then all of a sudden," she told me, "the midwife gets very serious, like, 'Now! I'll hold your shoulders up, and you're going to bear down!' The sun was coming up. And there was this miraculous moment where they're like, 'I can see the head! I can see the head!' And suddenly, you feel like you can push more. And there you were."

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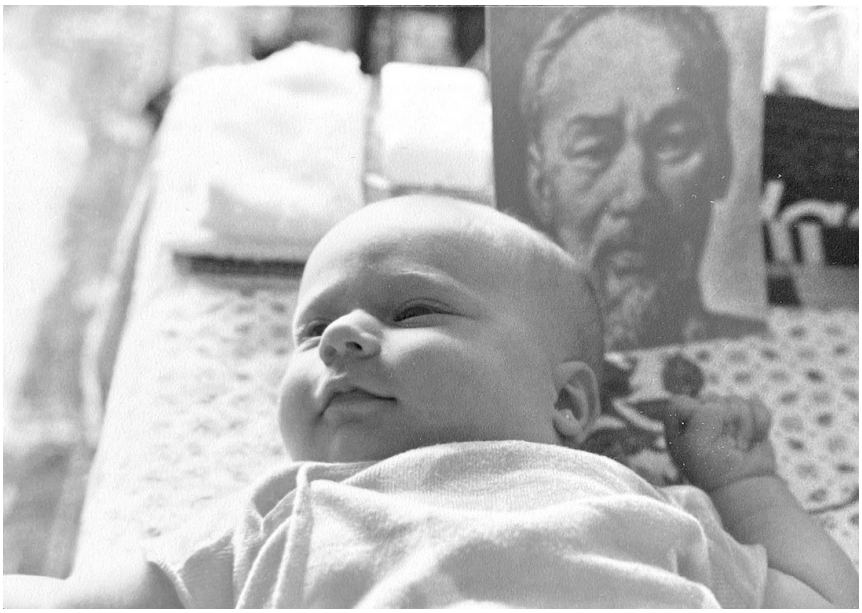
A Lost Person

(Off the Grid, 1978)

I see that my own hands can make
The world that's in my mind.

—Langston Hughes, "I look at the world"



Me, eight months old, with Ho Chi Minh keeping me company before a nap.

When I was about eight months old, my family left San Francisco for good. "We just fled," Bernardine says. "We jumped in the car and left. We thought maybe we'd go to New York. But everything was gone. We really didn't know what was next."

So we all piled into a car and started our first long drive through the underground, south through the Mojave Desert toward Texas, then east to Florida, before winding our way back north to Harlem to build a new life.

It was 1978. Jimmy Carter had just declared amnesty for draft dodgers who fled to Canada during the Vietnam War. Apple had released its first Apple II personal computer. As we drove east across the country, you could almost see the culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s receding in the rearview mirror, and the new 1980s advancing toward us over the horizon.

We started to feel out of step with our times.

I wasn't even a year old, so of course I couldn't understand what my parents were feeling at the time. But I somehow sensed, from my very earliest flickers of memory and consciousness, that my mother was profoundly unhappy.

Her own mom, my grandma Dorothy, might have said Bernardine had the baby blues. Today, we might call it postnatal mood disorder or postpartum depression. But I don't think it was postpartum, exactly; I think my mom's unhappiness was, in fact, post-revolutionary.

Because as the 1970s came to a close, and as she stared down a middle age she had never thought she would live to see, Bernardine found herself struggling to make sense of her past. To settle on a new narrative that might help explain her life up to this point, and give her a renewed sense of hope and a way to imagine a better future.

I couldn't have known it at the time—she might not have fully understood it herself—but my mom was struggling to reinvent herself one more time, to grow up, and change, without abandoning her core sense of herself—the force and purpose that had long given her life meaning. She was trying to figure out how she could be both a mother and a revolutionary at the same time.

Over the next year and a half, she would write a series of letters to a friend on the California commune named Harriet, whom she called "sister." These letters rarely require, or even request, a response (if Harriet did respond, Bernardine would have probably burned her letters). Today, they read to me like entries in a diary, as if my mother is talking to another side of herself—struggling to make sense of a newly divided identity, alternating between feelings of raw self-loathing and fierce determination.

"I am writing you from work on a rainy gray day and feeling myself very gray (or is it blue)," she wrote in one letter. "Wish you were near to talk with . . . Still, I'm happy. I feel there is the opportunity for revolutionary work now and it is up to me to seize it and come through. As you well know, without this I am a lost person."

My mother's younger voice comes through in these letters in a way I had never heard before—intimate and vulnerable, but still authentically her. From the road, from our place in Harlem, and from a series of workplaces at dead-end jobs around the country, she gives her friend updates on her daily life, shares dry anecdotes about being a new parent, recommends (and criticizes) books and films she's thinking about. These letters, which I only discovered recently, helped me decode some of the mystery of my family and my early years: my mother's deep unhappiness, from my earliest memories; her chilly reserve with my father; her shifting sense of herself; and what was coming next, for all of us.

Letter to "Dearest Friend" from "Roses," February 17, 1978
Me and J. [Bill was now going by "Joe Brown"] have just been going thru a crisis in our relationship, centering a great deal on my emotional freeze of the past 1 ½ years. There are many things like male supremacy and our history together that we have to struggle against, and I have to fight with myself to keep this up.

I want to continue the relationship but that becomes phony unless I am in it, actively and openly. This is very hard for me even in good times, and now – to oppose it – means having to resolve my self-hatred and put the past somehow into the present. Hard to do with no basis for self-confidence, but also necessary in order to be able to act.

Letter to "Dearest Sister" from "Roses," April 20, 1978
J. moved out two days ago, at my initiative, and we are both quite freaked out about it now that it is fact.

At times, I believe that this is really right and that we will only grow from it, individually and in terms of our love and relationship. Other times is pure panic and a swamp of pain and lost intentions.

What I want is for us to have a period apart, for greater Independence and strength for me and greater identification with other women. I want us to have a period of growing and getting back together stronger and—

April 27, 1978—Thursday [one week later]
You can see that I never made it any further in my initial attempts to tell you why we decided to live apart for a while. Now, I feel less desperate although the feelings come and go, changing dramatically.

I know that I only feel clear when being challenged by other women, or identifying those parts of myself that are dependent and afraid. I've begun karate classes which is a good new thing for me, and maybe a way to meet some new women friends.

My job has turned into drudgery for me. I really don't like the people here and the racism and sexism are so all-pervasive and basic it leaves me feeling sick and hating people more than I want to. I'm trying to be vigilant with myself. To be self-critical, and to be honest emotionally about who I am, [but] my capability for rationalization is great as is my self-centeredness.

The only black man who works here was jumped by two plain clothes white undercover pigs while on a work assignment two months ago. He has been in constant back pain ever since, and a neck brace, and facing criminal charges (completely fabricated) . . . I went around and asked everyone to contribute money for his medical and legal bills – a rather puny

gesture. Needless to say, only a few people gave, some because they were embarrassed, rather than from conviction. And I am now identified as a weirdo.

Z can now stand by himself and yesterday did his first real walking – six or seven steps.

Letter to "Dearest Sister," unsigned, May 22, 1978

J. and I aren't living together now . . . We see each other most every day, passing Z, and then spend some time together ourselves maybe twice a week.

We seem to keep having some good talks to delve into the problems in our relationship and in us, and we are trying to do some concrete work. I have times of feeling terribly lonely but I am also more busy than I can manage.

Letter to "Dear Sister" from "roses," June 1, 1978

J. and I saw rather a lot of each other last week – He didn't work much and we had the long weekend. I think that it is very difficult for me to not look to him to share everything – What Z. did that day, articles in the paper I think he'd be interested in, and of course, the more important things . . . I don't feel that it is a goal to change that closeness exactly, but to loosen it, to not be so dependent on it, to not be exclusive with it, to develop my independent and feminist identity.

Frankly, I haven't much idea of how to do it.

Letter to "Dearest Sister" from "me," July 24, 1978

It's steaming summer here, rats having tripled their numbers in the last 2 years due to cutbacks and people are out on the stoops all night because it's too hot to sleep.

Last week I had mastitis, very bad for 2 days – raging fever and chills. It took 30 hours to figure out that I had a sore breast and it was connected. Sure enough, once the fever broke I felt much better and now even the lump and soreness is gone.

It was scary to feel so sick so suddenly, makes the responsibility of the babe loom large.

Letter to "Dearest Sister" from "Roses," September 6, 1978

We have had a wrenching time, because I feel that we should continue living apart for the next while, tho I also want to have another baby and love him a lot – and he was very shocked and hurt by this and is having a rough time.

I hope we make it thru all this and I hope we can change and grow enough to be productive. Why is it so hard?

* * *

The letters end here—for reasons that will soon become clear. But even this one-sided, partial conversation helped answer some of my earliest, most pressing questions about my family and my childhood:

Why was my mother so unhappy in my earliest memories?

Because she was reeling from the death of the underground and blaming herself for the part she played in its undoing—the betrayal of her friends, and of herself. She had lost faith in her own political and moral instincts, and her core sense of herself as a committed revolutionary.

Why did she and Bill have that comradely chill between them—the sense of being co-conspirators rather than a traditional romantic couple?

Because she was trying to create distance. She was now in her mid-thirties and had only recently become a mom. But despite having a child to take care of—maybe especially because motherhood was a role she had been reluctant to take on in the first place—she was having a hard time figuring out what to do with her life. Or even who to be. She was in the process of reinventing herself, once more, for a new era of struggle, and needed space—from Bill and from me—to build her new identity.

She and Bill would soon get back together—apparently, she had accomplished the internal work she felt she had to do. Because by the time we settled in Harlem—when my clearest memories of my childhood begin—we had become a relatively stable nuclear family again. But there are still a few questions left, about some of the darkest, most mysterious parts of my childhood—those early years following my birth, when we were all still living underground, when my parents chose to risk their lives, and our family, for one final shot at revolution.

Because it turns out, when the Black Liberation Army came calling, reeling from their bloody war with the FBI and the NYPD, desperate to keep their flagging resistance alive, and reached out for help with one last violent revolutionary action, my parents both jumped at the chance to volunteer—even though they now had a toddler waiting for them at home, and another child on the way.

“You want to be both honest with your children and you want to protect your children,” Bill told me when I asked about what I’d found. “You want them to know something about the world, but you don’t want them to know too much, too soon. And so, every one of us finds ways to lie to our children.”

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Part 6

One Last Job

And about this time I had a vision—and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it."

—Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1831

Me, age two, pointing to a portrait of Nat Turner on the wall, Harlem, underground, c. 1979.

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The Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla

(Harlem, 1979)

In the fall of 1979, an old friend reached out to my father through the underground communications network. The man dialed a number printed on an old piece of plastic DYMO tape, and the two spoke on separate payphones. The man made it clear he needed to meet up with Bill in person—to discuss something urgent, and potentially dangerous.

Later that week, my father watched from above, standing on a high rock outcropping in Central Park, as the man walked his trajectory—past the Museum of Natural History and the Delacorte Theater, across the wide open spaces of the Great Lawn. Bill walked after him, keeping his distance, past teenagers tossing a frisbee, couples lounging on blankets, kids playing tag. Nobody seemed to be paying attention.

Finally, the two men fell in step together on the bridle path around the Central Park reservoir. And Bill's contact got straight down to business—he and the Black Liberation Army had a job for Bill to do.

Of course, Bill already had a job; as "Tony Lee," he had been working full-time at my preschool for several months. Bernardine was pregnant again. They were making plans to surface—to build new lives as parents, to go back to being lawyers and teachers, and to become legitimate citizens. But by the time Bill left Central Park that afternoon, those plans had all changed.

"I remember weighing it with Bernardine very heavily," Bill told me, "and feeling heavy about it. And being perhaps more reluctant than ever before to participate. Our minds were mostly focused on survival, taking care of you, and having a second baby. So, when I was asked to do this, I

didn’t really want to do it on some level. But on another level, I wanted nothing more than to do it.”

“But you were pretty close to turning yourselves in at the time,” I reminded him. “Pretty close to Malik being born. You were a father. You were literally working during the day as a daycare teacher. Didn’t you think about all that? About the risk you were taking?”

“Well, it’s like everything else about being involved in the movement,” he responded. “On the one hand, you want to have a life, you want to have your life. Like every other human being, the speck of the universe you understand best is your life. So, you want to have that. On the other hand, if you’re a person who’s made a commitment to something larger, you want that larger thing to work also. And so, it’s never quite left me—this contradiction. How do you take responsibility for yourself and your family, and at the same time take some responsibility for the larger world? And that’s difficult. Or not so much that it’s difficult—it’s a contradiction. And living within that contradiction is never easy.”

Bernardine, at the same time, faced her own contradiction—she had her own new job. One of the other moms at our preschool had offered her (as “Louise Douglas,” shortened to Lou) a position as salesclerk and assistant store manager at Broadway Baby, a trendy kids’ clothing boutique on Broadway and 81st Street, just a few doors down from Zabar’s grocery on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. This woman didn’t know who Lou was, of course—she only knew her as a fellow mom and thought she might make a stylishly bohemian advertisement for the store. And the job was a natural fit for my mom’s circumstances: a way to be around other expectant mothers, to relax and take care of herself during the second half of her pregnancy.

My mom was still underground—no longer connected to an organization, but unwilling to give the government a victory by turning herself in. She was still a fugitive, though it had been years since either she or my father took part in any illegal action. But she had stayed in touch with a few old friends, including former Weatherwoman Kathy Boudin. And those friends now needed her help, the way fugitives in the underground always need help: finding safehouses, raising money, sourcing ID. And as it turned out, the job at Broadway Baby offered an unexpected opportunity.

* * *

Kathy Boudin had been part of Weatherman since the beginning; when my mom stormed out of the SDS convention in 1969, Kathy followed her. She sat in on the War Council in Flint, staggered naked out of the smoking crater of the West Village townhouse in 1970, and was (allegedly) my mother's partner in crime in the bombing of the Capitol building in 1972.

Unlike Bernardine, who had to rebel against her parents to become an activist, Kathy had literally grown up in the revolution. Her dad, Leonard Boudin, was a well-known radical left-wing lawyer who represented Fidel Castro's government. And in 1960, when Kathy was seventeen years old, Leonard brought her with him to Havana, to see a real revolution up close.

"The revolution is an unbelievable thing," Kathy wrote in her teenage diary that year. "People are so wonderful here. Everyone seems to be an *amigo* of everyone. And not in the rather false way – but a deep feeling . . . You have to come here to believe it. It is almost [*sic*] utopian idea, and yet it exists – it is a reality!"

Kathy's adolescent romantic feelings about Cuba seem to have been inspired, or at least reinforced (as such feelings about a foreign country often are), by an actual romance. "Two boys—serious, very—spent the afternoon and evening with us," she wrote during her first week in Havana. "We *commared mucho* [ate a lot]. We walked in the streets and talked. We listened and tried to understand. In the evening we went to a local fiesta. Carlos bothered me with sex but who cares? I felt that I almost loved Alberto—his passion, his revolutionary ideas, his wit—he is [like] no one I know!"

The boys eventually took Kathy and a female friend to the big Victory Day parade in Havana, which celebrated the anniversary of the Cuban Revolution—an experience that changed Kathy's life.

"I saw them march by," she wrote in her diary. "The Army. The students. The *campesitos* [peasants]. The teachers—and I cheered. And then they brought the tanks and I cheered. And then I stopped. I felt sick and thought of mother. [Kathy's mom, Jean Boudin, was a poet and a pacifist.] I thought, 'what am I doing cheering guns? And power, and armies?' But then Alberto told me—he said what I know: '*no me gusto pero es necesario.*' [I don't like it, but it's necessary.] And why is that? Because of my country. If we didn't have bombs it wouldn't happen. And so I didn't cheer anymore and I wasn't glad—I was unhappy. And so as I cried and

they cheered but I knew that they really hated the cheering and I thought of Alberto and so life goes."

Kathy's diary, always full of this touching mix of adolescent emotion and idealism, ends with a perfect teenage juxtaposition of heartbreak and hope: "Today we said goodbye to Tanillo and Alberto," she wrote on her final page. "I shall come back. I shall return to my country. And there shall be change!"

That determination to make change—by any means necessary—led Kathy a year later to Bryn Mawr, where she became an antiwar activist, and then into SDS and the Revolutionary Youth Movement, and finally to the Weather Underground. Like my mom, Kathy had been living underground, as a fugitive, since 1970. But when the bust of Van Lydegraf's Revolutionary Action Squad swallowed what remained of the group in California and the national organization splintered into multiple factions, what Weatherman Brian Flanagan calls "Weather debris," Kathy, along with the last vestiges out east—the remnants of Terry and J.J.'s New York cell—was left adrift and unsure about what to do next.

As with previous crises in the group, some members drifted slowly to the surface; others disappeared, cutting ties with their friends and their fugitive past. But a few, like Kathy, doubled down. This group rechristened themselves the May 19 Communist Organization (M19CO) and set out to carry on the revolution.

Kathy and a few other former Weatherwomen made up the core of M19CO, which styled itself a new revolutionary resistance for the 1980s—a radical feminist queer collective of white female anti-imperialist guerrillas, following the leadership of the Black liberation struggle as the best "path to the liberation of white women." In its founding manifesto (sold for 25 cents in Brooklyn, New York), M19CO argued that "Revolution is the main trend in the world" and called for reparations on a massive scale—for the U.S. to hand over Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina to found a new Black nation. The spark for the revolution, they imagined, would come from white women like themselves, serving as accomplices for a guerrilla army made up of mostly Black men. The women would source ID, rent safehouses, and drive getaway cars—and recommit themselves to being living examples of radical solidarity and commitment, following the direction of the "Black vanguard" wherever it led.

It would be a bumpy ride.

* * *

In the winter of 1979, a young white woman walked into Broadway Baby, where “Lou Douglas” was folding tiny stacks of onesies on a shelf. Hearing the bell above the door jingle, she looked up, and the two women smiled. It was obvious at a glance they had something in common; both Lou and her new customer were visibly pregnant, about seven months along. So, they had plenty to talk about as they browsed the racks of expensive doll-like outfits together, and Lou rang up the woman’s purchases.

The customer paid with a personal check and gave her New York driver’s license as ID. She thanked Lou for her help, wished her luck with the pregnancy, smiled back over her shoulder as she left the store, and the two women never saw each other again.

Four months later, on April 23, 1980, at 11:25 in the morning, a car crashed into a Purolator armored truck outside the European–American Bank in Inwood, Long Island. Three men jumped out, pulling pistols and a shotgun; one planted himself in the middle of an intersection, blocking traffic and terrifying pedestrians with his submachine gun, while a female driver (herself three months pregnant) idled in a getaway car across the street. The robbers quickly handcuffed the guards, threw them face down on the sidewalk, emptied the bags from the back of the armored truck, and made off with $529,000 in cash (the equivalent of over $2 million today).

Police quickly traced the abandoned vehicle’s license plates to the American International Rent-A-Car company in Brooklyn and pulled its files. The name on the rental agreement seemed an unlikely bank robber: an upper-middle-class mother with a new baby at home, and police soon cleared her of any involvement in the crime.

But detectives noticed a strange connection to an unsolved case in their files: an eerily similar robbery attempt in Greenburgh, New York, just a few weeks earlier. The van used in that hold-up had also been rented in the name of an upper-middle-class mom. And the only apparent connection between these two well-off women with clean records now linked to a spree of violent armed robberies? Both had shopped at Broadway Baby over the holidays. And the saleswoman who waited on both was Lou Douglas—a.k.a. Bernardine Dohrn.

When Bernardine met a customer of a certain type—white women in their late twenties or early thirties, who were, of course, most of Broadway

Baby's customers—she'd ask for ID to verify their personal check, and as she rang up the purchase, she'd memorize the information on the license: name, birthdate, address, license number, height, hair color, and eye color. A few days later, another woman, maybe Kathy Boudin, would walk into a DMV office and tell the clerk she'd lost her license. The information she gave matched the database, so the clerk would take a new picture on the spot and issue a replacement ID. These were, again, real driver's licenses, not fakes; they could stand up to police scrutiny during a traffic stop. And the ID would never be reported missing, because the women who had had their identities stolen would never even notice it had happened until it was too late.

These licenses would soon be used to rent cars and vans used in a string of armed robberies and bank heists across New York and New Jersey throughout 1980 and 1981. They would enable a crime spree that would bring new law enforcement attention to the radical undergrounds of the 1970s—and would envelop my family in one final existential crisis.

This—my mother's secret work at Broadway Baby—is the second time (after our camping trip to West Virginia) I've found evidence that my parents hid something from me. Even as they became parents and teachers, even as they prepared to surface and build a new life for our family, they had continued working as part of the support network for the Black underground. And there was one more big revelation still to come—a revelation that confirms something I always suspected, or sensed, as a child, but could never fully understand or articulate: that in the earliest years of my life, my parents were not simply fugitives but soldiers. That my brother, my friends, and I were not just born into the underground, but into the midst of an ongoing guerrilla war.

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Because the World Needed It to Happen

(Clinton Correctional Facility, 1979)

You can jail revolutionaries, but you can't jail the revolution.
—Fred Hampton

Assata Shakur is taken by police from Rikers Island prison to the Middlesex County jail.

A few weeks after meeting up with his BLA contact in Central Park, Bill took the day off from work at my preschool. He called in sick, saying he had the flu. He left me with my mom, who was then seven months pregnant, and caught the 1/9 train downtown to a public parking garage. There, he found a van waiting for him. The key was under the mat. A garage ticket was tucked into the visor.

An hour or so later, Bill parked the van outside the Laneco department store in a strip mall in Clinton, New Jersey.

A few miles away, BLA military leader Sekou Odinga had just arrived at the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women. At the trailer that served as the reception area, Sekou handed over his identification, signed the visitors' log with the name on the ID, and was driven across the prison complex to South Hall, the unit housing the facility's seventeen maximum-security female inmates. Through the van's wire-reinforced windows, Sekou could see the dirty, low-slung, yellow brick buildings and tangles of fences and razor wire surrounding South Hall. Beyond the fences, the trees had turned red and gold and were starting to lose their leaves.

The guard driving the van, Stephen Ravettina ("Rav" to his friends) didn't pay much attention to his passenger. He waved casually to other guards as he drove across the prison campus. He didn't realize it yet, but he had forgotten to frisk the visitor.

A few miles away, Bill waited in the parking lot, listening to the radio and watching the clock. He didn't know exactly what was happening—or even what his role would be—but he knew something was in process, and whatever it was had to be illegal and dangerous. "It was a dramatic time," he told me. "You knew that an action was underway, you knew that all these gears were in motion, and you were one of the gears."

Suddenly, there was a knock on the passenger-side window—his contact from the meeting in Central Park. Bill reached across to unlock the door and the man slid into the van and told Bill to drive.

Back at South Hall, the prison matron, Helen Anderson, came out to meet the transport. She waved at Officer Ravettina, brought the visitor inside, and sat him down across the table from the inmate he'd come to see.

It was JoAnne Chesimard, a.k.a. Assata Shakur.

Sekou and Assata embraced, and under cover of the hug Sekou passed her a .357 magnum revolver.

Officer Ravettina, meanwhile, turned his van around to pick up new visitors at the reception trailer—two more Black men. One got in back and one sat up front, in the passenger seat. They didn't speak, either to each other or to him, but Rav didn't find this suspicious or even unusual—most visitors didn't want to talk to the guards. Some were hostile, but most just seemed to have a lot on their minds. He didn't take it personally; he was happy to leave them to their thoughts.

During the later investigation, Officer Ravettina would be able to identify these two visitors only as two Black men in their mid-thirties, though he racked his memory and even tried hypnosis to bring back a mental picture of the pair. Either he had blocked out their faces or never bothered to get a good look at them.

But about halfway across the prison campus, one of the men pulled a .45 automatic and pressed it hard against Rav's neck. He couldn't feel anything—he must have gone instantly numb with shock. He glanced at his two-way radio, maybe even started to reach for it.

"You don't want to do that," the man growled. And Rav started to shake uncontrollably.

When they arrived at South Hall, the matron came out to meet the hijacked van. "We started walking in," Rav later told a reporter, "and either they told her, or I did, 'Open the gate!' And as the gate opened there was JoAnne—with a gun pointing at me."

The prison matron started to cry. She seemed like she might panic, even scream. Rav whispered to her, "Shut up and be cool!"

The BLA soldiers handcuffed the two prison employees and piled everyone into the van, driving it across the grassy hills of the prison campus to the squat brown and yellow building next door—the Hunterdon State School for the Retarded.

They left Rav and the matron handcuffed in the back of the van and got into two waiting cars, a blue compact and a Lincoln Continental, both driven by white women—a bet that the New Jersey cops would be unable to make the mental leap between armed Black male militants and "nice-looking" white girls out for a drive. It was a tactic to use the supposed preconceptions and implicit biases of the police against them. BLA member Marilyn Buck, who had come up with this strategy and drove one of the getaway cars, called it "the white edge."

The two cars headed off in opposite directions as police converged on the prison and set up checkpoints on nearby highways. But both cars managed to slip through the dragnet.

Half an hour later, my father had something, or someone, new in the back of his van. It wasn't Assata—but whatever cargo he was carrying, he didn't want to be caught driving it around.

"Everything was compartmentalized," he told me. "I didn't know exactly what was happening. I didn't know what everyone else was doing.

One of the things about an action like that is the elaborateness of it means that you can play a very small role in a small corner, not even fully understanding what the larger piece is."

But as Bill pulled the van onto a road in New Jersey, heading toward Manhattan, he was feeling understandably nervous. "I was scared," he admitted. "I was really, really tense. I had my hands on the wheel at two and ten. I was gripping the wheel, and I was trying to stay right within the speed limit. I was trying to look as normal as I could possibly look. And then I saw a state trooper pulled over, with his arms crossed—just staring at the traffic coming at him."

A police checkpoint: state troopers by the side of the highway, eyeing each car as it passed, waving some drivers through and directing others to stop on the shoulder for a search.

Bill's mind flashed back to the time Assata was pulled over, years earlier. The shootout. Zayd Shakur's death. "As soon as I saw the trooper standing there by his car," he told me, "arms folded, staring at every driver who went by, it was clear—*they were onto it*. They knew what had happened and they were looking for something—an escape vehicle or whatever. And they were setting up layers and layers of checks. And it was really terrifying. But of course, the whole point of me driving the van is I'm a young white guy driving a van, and they're not looking for that."

Bill held his breath, desperately hoping the white edge would hold—that cops looking for a Black guerrilla gang would be unable to imagine the involvement of some random white guy with a van.

"He looked right at me," Bill remembers. "And I . . . just went by. I squeaked through. And when I passed the cop, all that tension turned to giddiness. I remember, very clearly, being absolutely giddy once I passed that cop. *I made it!* I got through! And came out the other side. I had survived. And I'd done what I said I would do. So, I went back to Manhattan. I put the van in a big parking lot in Midtown. I put the key under the mat. I left the parking ticket. And I had a phone call where I told them where the van was. And that was the end of it."

I asked my dad recently whether he'd truly considered the risks he was taking that day. Even if he didn't know what was going on with the larger jailbreak, even if he didn't know what was happening with Assata, he must have known the consequences of being involved in what was clearly an illegal action. What if he'd been pulled over on the highway? What if his

van had been searched? What might the police have found? And what would have happened, not only to him but to me, my mother, and my unborn brother—to our family, and the future my parents said they wanted to build?

"It was a difficult decision," he admitted. "It felt monumental, it felt important. We were pretty clear that Bernardine would be with you. We weren't *both* tangled up in it. But yeah, it was, in retrospect, really risky. And really on the edge."

I pressed him on this. "In a way, you were both involved," I reminded him. "Her thing with Broadway Baby. You getting involved with this. Did you really think about what would happen if you were caught?"

"Yeah. I thought my life would end."

"So why?"

"Because it mattered," he said. "Because the world needed it to happen."

* * *

Assata's escape, and the bloodless, efficient action to free her, would be the last successful operation of the revolutionary underground(s). Their final collapse was coming.

But we didn't know it yet; our little family was still growing. On February 1, 1980, my brother Malik was born. Like me, he was given the name of a Black freedom fighter, both the middle name of Zayd Malik Shakur and the Muslim name of Malcolm X: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.

Bernardine wrote to her friend Harriet in California with the happy news:

> It was quite fast compared to last time – 10 hours total, but only four or five serious ones.
>
> Z was wide-eyed and wonderful, he didn't like my last minute yelling, but he loved the baby coming and then he climbed up on the bed and kissed us all and said into the awed hush, "The grown-ups may call him Malik, but I call him garbage."
>
> He must have been working on that one for months.
>
> [Malik] is calm and serious and sweet. A lot like Zayd but hoards [sic] of dark brown hair – boy-children, I'm going to keep having

boy-children.

Our tiny fifth-floor flophouse in Harlem was becoming crowded. Not with possessions—Malik's crib, like mine, was a simple dresser drawer lined with blankets, his bathtub the sink of our kitchenette—but a second kid was apparently some kind of tipping point. Just as some parents realize after their second child that they're going to need a bigger place, or to move out to the suburbs, or to upgrade to a minivan, my mom decided a family of four was too much for the underground lifestyle.

"I felt like we hadn't hurt *you* too much by having you be a fugitive," she told me, laughing. "Two kids was another thing. And you were getting older. And also the organization was old. The world had moved on."

Just weeks after Malik's birth, Bernardine and Bill decided to make a deal with prosecutors and turn themselves in. My mom's longtime lawyer, Michael Kennedy, called the DA's office in Illinois and they hammered out an agreement. Bernardine's federal charges had already been dropped due to FBI misconduct; if she would surrender, voluntarily, in Chicago, she could avoid significant jail time.

So, in December 1980, my mom woke me up before dawn and we made our final cross-country drive through the underground. Police knew now that we were headed for Chicago. And if they caught her before she could surrender, the deal was off. Bernardine could still go to prison for decades. So it was a tense drive. Bill kept our station wagon well below the speed limit. My mom held my baby brother on her lap and watched the horizon. Nobody spoke much.

"We were scared," my mom told me. "I didn't want to get caught, you know, on Highway 80, coming to Chicago. That would have been really foolish, and I wanted to actually turn myself in on my feet, not in handcuffs."

Still, despite the high stakes, to me this all felt cozy and familiar. I had always loved being on the road with my family, safe inside a moving car, in our own little sealed-off, self-sufficient ecosystem, insulated from the outside world.

This was the drive when I had that dangerous conversation with the old couple in line at Burger King, when I almost blew my family's cover by telling a couple of strangers we were running from the FBI, and nearly got us caught at the very last moment of our lives underground. But in spite of my best efforts to ruin the plan, we did finally make it to the courthouse in

Chicago—and opened the car doors into a howling media firestorm: photographers snapping pictures, reporters shouting questions.

To the news media, it was an odd kind of human interest story: the surfacing of a family of time-travelers, real-life fugitives from the Sixties, which by this point felt like hundreds of years ago. But nobody outside the courthouse seemed to find it very interesting. Two men in their twenties, "sharing a joint in a car down the street," admitted to a *New York Times* reporter they "neither knew nor cared who Bernardine Dohrn was."

Inside the courtroom, surrounded by police and microphones, my mother read a short written statement, making it clear that surrendering didn't mean she was giving up. "I regret not at all our efforts to side with the forces of liberation," she told the judge. "The nature of the system has not changed. Given the system which perpetuates such harsh oppression and suffering, rebellion is inevitable and continuous. And I remain committed to the struggle ahead."

The judge lectured her briefly about living in a democracy; free people in a free society, he told her, must be willing to resolve their political differences peacefully and work together to make necessary change. "Are you ready to join us?" he asked.

"I have a different view of America," Bernardine replied.

She pled guilty to bail-jumping and aggravated battery, both misdemeanors stemming from the Days of Rage riots in 1969. She paid a $1,500 fine and was released the same day, with three years of probation.

It still amazes me: that a former Most Wanted Fugitive could escape with just a slap on the wrist. But she'd been underground a long time; the country had apparently moved on; the government had its own secrets and crimes to cover up; and nobody seemed to have much stomach for relitigating the struggles of the 1960s. So our family headed back to Harlem—aboveground, regular citizens for the first time in my short life.

It was 1981. I was four years old. Reagan was about to be sworn in as president, having been elected a few months earlier on a promise to "make America great again." Our revolution, finally, seemed to be over.

But a few of our friends were still underground. And the final scattered remnants of the BLA and M19CO were gearing up for one last desperate, violent action.

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The Family

(Rockland County, 1981)

The enemy wants to annihilate us and fights relentlessly to find us and destroy us, so our great weapon consists of hiding from him and attacking him by surprise.

—Carlos Marighella, *The Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*

Kathy Boudin with her infant son, Chesa, New York, c. 1980–81.

Bernardine's friend Kathy Boudin was still underground in New York. She was also, like many of her radical contemporaries, a new mom; her son, Chesa, was born on August 21, 1981, just a few months after my brother Malik.

Like Bernardine, by the early 1980s Kathy had started to look around for what might be next for her, to contemplate a new kind of future, as a mother. She worked for a time at a catering company in New York, where her boss remembered her as "a proud mom who often showed snapshots of her baby son to her co-workers." She took classes to become a paralegal, and even thought about applying to grad school at her alma mater, Bryn

Mawr, after she surfaced. She also started taking Valium for panic attacks—brought on, she said later, by the strain of "trying to begin again."

Kathy's partner and the father of her child, former Weatherman David Gilbert, was also underground, working at a moving company under the name Lou Wasser, telling co-workers that he was a struggling writer finishing a long historical novel. "Lou found the perfect cover," one of the other movers at the company later told reporters. "He said that he was really a writer and, of course, most of us working here are writers or musicians or actors or painters."

His other co-workers remembered Lou as friendly and kind, if unusually political. "Lou was a decent, sensitive, fully emotional human being," recalled a mover on his crew. "He was a hard worker, and you could tell he was a political person, concerned about issues like feminism. He used to give the guys on the trucks a hard time when they made remarks about women on the streets." Another worker remembered Lou "deploring the conditions under which people lived in South and Central America, [and] condemning the 'lies' surrounding . . . the Gulf of Tonkin resolution during the Vietnam War."

Maybe by the 1980s David felt safe from detection—after all, he'd been a fugitive on and off for over a decade. Or maybe he simply couldn't hide his core beliefs—they were just too central to who he was.

"I wanted to be as close to the person I am without ringing alarm bells," David told me recently, when I asked about this. "When guys hooted at women when we were in the truck, you know, I tried to explain. I didn't say, *rar rar rar*, but I tried to say, 'That's not really how we want to be.' And some stuff about internationalism."

Kathy, meanwhile, was raising their baby on her own. Though David visited regularly, he made it clear that family was a secondary priority for him. "Kathy was the one who really pushed that we should have a baby," he told me. "And I was reluctant. But really, it became a choice: either stay with Kathy and have a baby or lose your relationship. So I ran with it. And of course, when the baby comes, he's so winning and adorable and lovable. You know, it just overflows your heart."

Still, David was, first and foremost, an urban guerrilla, committed to fighting in the coming war for Black liberation, whatever the cost. And Kathy, for her part, felt deeply conflicted. "Anti-Black activity was on the rise," she told me. "I mean, the Ku Klux Klan was still appearing, people

were being hanged. And I think that reinforced for me the meaning of my staying underground. I should stay underground because this is my essence—a white woman who's willing to sacrifice her life to support Black people's struggle."

But now Kathy had a new baby at home, who was just a year old.

"I was grappling with the desire to go aboveground," she told me, "and just try to build a normal life. [But] how do you live a life when your government is doing what we were doing? I felt a desperation. But I also think always there was that question of 'Who am I? And how do I make my life have meaning?'"

Even as she was wrestling with these existential questions—who she was at her core, and what new person she wanted to become—Kathy, like Bill and Bernardine a year earlier, received an urgent plea for help from her friends in the Black underground.

* * *

The BLA, by this point, was a shadow of its former self. A series of assaults by the NYPD and FBI had shattered the Black underground into smaller and smaller groups. After Assata Shakur's escape from prison in 1979, there was no inspirational national leader who could unite these factions into a coherent organization. And by 1981, all that remained of the BLA were a few scattered paramilitary splinter cells, robbing banks and drug dealers just to survive.

The most active of these cells was the Republic of New Afrika, led by a charismatic militant and acupuncturist named Dr. Mutulu Shakur. Mutulu had deep ties to the old Cleaver Faction of the BLA—he had been married for a while to Panther 21 member (and Tupac's mom) Afeni Shakur—and his small clique included Panther 21 defendants and BLA soldiers Sekou Odinga and Kuwasi Balagoon. Their cell operated out of Mutulu's acupuncture clinic in a Harlem brownstone, the Black Acupuncture Advisory Association of North America (BAAANA) and called themselves, in another echo of previous radical formations, the Action 5.

The Action 5 began their new crime spree in the spring of 1977, right around the time I was born, first sticking up a Bronx meatpacking plant memorably named the House O'Weenies, before teaming up with Kathy Boudin, Marilyn Buck, and M19CO to take advantage of the white edge:

using white female comrades to find safehouses, procure reliable ID, and drive getaway cars. Their greatest accomplishment was breaking Assata out of prison in 1979. But by 1980, a year later, the group had fallen on hard times. Mutulu and other members of the Action 5 had developed expensive cocaine habits, and the BAAANA clinic was desperately in need of repairs. They needed money, fast.

Following Assata's escape, the Action 5 shifted their focus almost exclusively to "expropriations," or bank robberies. They held up branches of Citibank and Chase Manhattan and a series of armored cars in New York and New Jersey through 1979 and 1980—a tactic taken straight from Carlos Marighella's revolutionary bible, *The Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*, which recommends "assaults on money carriers and armored vehicles" and suggests that revolutionaries dedicate twenty-four hours a day to "expropriations from the people's exploiters."

By late 1981, the alliance of different sides of the radical underground—Black soldiers of the BLA and white female militants of M19CO—had become firmly established. It even had its own name: the Family.

When the Family reached out to Kathy and David for more help in late 1981, the group already had a plan in mind: they were going to rob an armored car at a shopping mall in Nyack, New York. The soldiers of the Action 5 would stick up the guards and grab the cash. And then, as the cops searched for a group of armed Black men trying to make a getaway, the militants would be in the back of a U-Haul truck driven by a nice-looking white couple (though David Gilbert emphasizes that "the comrades in the BLA did not ask us to be in that position driving the U-Haul as a couple. . . . It was to be me driving the U-Haul, and the travesty of us being out together is completely on me and Kathy.").

The goal, as it was presented to Kathy and David, was to use the stolen money "for black people, as a mass of people, to channel the money back into the neighborhoods." It sounded like a classic Robin Hood action, and David signed on right away. His politics at the time dictated that white radicals should not try to be independent political thinkers, but loyal foot soldiers following the orders of Black paramilitary commanders. This may have sounded like a necessary exercise in solidarity—following orders, after all, can be justifiable, even noble, in times of war. But it can also curdle into cultlike obedience, an excuse for the abdication of moral agency and individual responsibility. As David himself wrote in a later self-

criticism, he had developed what he called a "service relationship mentality" toward the Black Liberation Army.

All this weighed on Kathy. She was worried about the action—how little she and David knew about the new plan, and how risky it sounded—especially now that they had a baby at home. But she couldn't quite resign herself to hanging back—a passive wife and mother, a white woman staying safe on the home front—while David went out alone to risk his life in the struggle.

"I wasn't going to have me as a woman not be able to do something and have David be able to go," Kathy told me. "That relegated me to the role of a mother, which was *part* of who I was, but I didn't want it to take away the other things that I wanted to be . . . I was determined to not have being a mother stop me from also being a revolutionary."

"It wasn't settled until the last minute," David admitted. "We went back and forth and up and down, around and around—anguished and difficult. We had what was supposed to be an iron rule. *We wouldn't both go out on the same job*. And this was supposed to be our *last* job. But neither of us wanted to be left out of the action."

In the end, neither Kathy nor David could be convinced to stay behind. Their ideological commitment had outstripped their judgment, their reason, and even their morality. On October 20, 1981, they dropped off their fourteen-month-old son with a babysitter. They told the woman they would be back in a few hours. And then they went out together to rob a bank.

* * *

Just before four in the afternoon of October 20, 1981, an armored truck operated by the Brink's Private Security Company made its regularly scheduled stop at the Nanuet shopping center, to pick up the mall's weekly cash drop. Two security guards, Joseph Trobino and Peter Paige, parked the truck and headed inside, joking and chatting. A few minutes later, they emerged from the mall, pulling a dolly cart piled high with canvas bags of cash.

As they started to load the bags into the truck, five men in ski masks, carrying M16s, emerged from a red van and confronted them.

Sekou Odinga, the military leader of the BLA and field commander of the Action 5—the man who personally broke Assata Shakur out of prison—

wasn’t there that day. He felt that the robbery was poorly planned and refused to participate in what he deemed a foolish and desperate action. The absence of the typically “stone cold” Odinga soon showed; the robbers were jumpy and nervous from the start, and something went terribly wrong.

Again, it’s not exactly clear who shot first, but within moments of the confrontation in the parking lot, both sides opened fire.

The BLA guys were armed for war, carrying shotguns and assault rifles; the bank security guards, holding six-shot company-issue revolvers, were quickly overwhelmed. Peter Paige was killed instantly, shot several times in the chest. His partner, Joseph Trombino, reached over to close the truck’s rear door, to guard the money—and a volley of gunfire nearly severed his arm from his body. The robbers grabbed the bags of cash—nearly $1.6 million in small, untraceable bills—piled back into their van, and hit the gas.

Kathy and David were parked in a U-Haul at the appointed meeting spot a few blocks away. They didn’t know yet about the shooting. They didn’t know a guard had been killed. But they were anxious, Kathy told me. “Anxious because we really don’t know anything that’s happened. So, we’re just waiting. Just sitting there.”

Suddenly, the red van screeched up behind them and the masked robbers jumped out, scrambled into the back of the U-Haul, and pulled the door shut. David turned out of the parking lot and headed toward the New York State Thruway, driving slowly and carefully, trying not to attract attention.

At this point, it seemed to Kathy like things were going according to plan. They had ditched the recognizable red van; she and David were in the cab of the nondescript U-Haul; the Action 5 guys were secure in the back with the money. They just had to count on the white edge to see them through.

What they didn’t know yet was that a college student named Sandra Torgerson had witnessed the vehicle exchange from the window of her apartment nearby. Sandra watched, wide-eyed, as a group of masked men holding assault rifles and bags of money ran from the van to the U-Haul, like something out of a Hollywood heist movie. She watched them drive away and called 911. Within minutes, police cars were converging on the area, cutting off potential escape routes, searching for the U-Haul truck.

“I remember driving along the highway,” Kathy told me, “and realizing that police [were coming up] alongside, and then realizing that they were actually going to pull us over. And that was very, very, very scary.”

Kathy and David didn’t say anything—they didn’t have to. They shared a quick, terrified look, and David eased the truck over to the shoulder of the road. They knew they couldn’t outrun the police. Like Assata and Sundiata and Zayd, they would have to try to bluff their way through.

A police officer came up to the window to collect David’s ID. Another, on the other side of the truck, asked Kathy what they were transporting in the back of the truck. Kathy forced a smile and explained that they were just moving some furniture to their new place.

The police looked them over. The woman seemed anxious, but the man’s driver’s license checked out. The couple didn’t look anything like the bank robbers the police were expecting to find. For a moment, it seemed like the cops might wave them through. But then a Black officer named Waverly Brown told Kathy he wanted to check the cargo box, just to be sure.

By this point traffic was stalled, bumper to bumper, in both directions; the checkpoints had snarled the afternoon commute. Dozens, maybe hundreds, of drivers watched from their cars as the two officers walked to the back of the U-Haul and unfastened the latch to the roll-up door. One of the robbers, who later turned government witness, recalled that in that moment the men inside the truck “took out their guns, checked their clips . . . and one said something to the effect of, ‘Well, let’s get it on’ or ‘It’s on now.’”

As soon as the door rolled open, machine-gun fire exploded from the back of the truck. The bank robbers jumped out of the U-Haul and tried to shoot their way through the checkpoint, scattering across the lanes of the thruway. Police officers fired back, and the highway suddenly became a war zone. One civilian witness, who’d seen combat overseas, said it felt exactly like the firefights he’d seen in Vietnam.

Kathy, meanwhile, got out of the U-Haul and started to run across the road, heading toward the Tappan Zee Bridge.

“I didn’t really know what was happening,” she told me later. “I heard some shots, and I tried to run away. I ran down a hill onto the New York Thruway. I mean, I didn’t even know where I was, exactly, but I went down a hill, hoping maybe I’d get picked up by a car and leave.”

Stuck in traffic down the hill, an off-duty corrections officer named Michael Koch heard gunshots. He drew his pistol from the glove compartment, got out of his car to see what was going on, and saw a young woman running toward him, frantic and terrified.

"She runs up to me," Koch later recalled, "and I know. *She's one of them*."

"I just remember somebody jumping out of a car," Kathy told me, "and saying, 'Get down! Get down! Get down!'"

Koch grabbed Kathy and pressed his gun to her head. "He dragged me back up the hill and handcuffed me," she remembered. "Once I was lying on the ground, I began to gather it—I mean, there was a police officer lying next to me on the ground. I didn't know he'd been killed."

In fact, two police officers—Edward O'Grady and Waverly "Chipper" Brown—were lying dead on the pavement beside Kathy, fatally shot in the melee. And, in another tragic historical irony, for an action supposedly meant to further the struggle for Black liberation, one of those men, Officer Waverly Brown, was the first Black patrolman in the history of the Nyack Police Department.

"That was the beginning of a new life," Kathy told me, when I asked her about that moment. "There was a part of me that had the sense, 'This life is over. This moment is over.' And this sense of odd relief that it was over. I'm no longer going to be a fugitive. I'm no longer going to be tormented by 'What should I do?' And it really wasn't until we got taken to the police station that I began to realize what had happened. And one of the things that happened was that Chesa was at the babysitter."

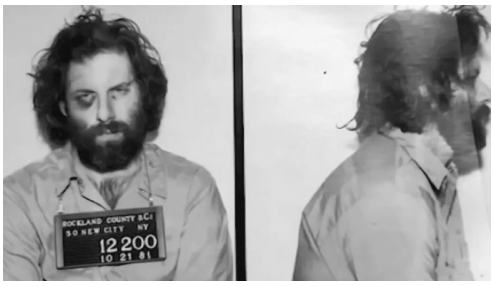
* * *

My parents heard about the Nyack disaster on the radio that night. It had been almost a year since my mother turned herself in. Our family was living in Harlem again, aboveground, adjusting to the unfamiliar role of tax-paying legitimate civilians. But we still didn't have a TV, so when they heard about the arrests my parents had to walk down five flights to find a sports bar where they could watch the coverage—and see footage of their friends in handcuffs.

"I remember seeing a picture of David," Bill told me, "and his face was completely bruised and swollen. And I remember just being devastated.

Because he looked like he had absolutely been tortured."

David's black eye could have come in the chaos of the firefight or during his arrest, and he doesn't use the word "torture" himself—but he does say he was roughed up by the police: "They were trying to make me talk," he told me. "Punching me in the face, working on my ribs. At one point an officer came in, completely hysterical, and put a shotgun to my neck and said, 'Talk, or I'm blasting you away!' But what can you do? You can't talk."



David Gilbert after his arrest, October 21, 1981.

For my parents, this was almost too much to process. An "expropriation" had ended in catastrophe: three people were dead, two of them police officers, leaving their own wives and children and families behind; Kathy and David were in custody, facing life in prison.

But one of the first things that occurred to Bill and Bernardine, as parents of two young children themselves, was, what's going to happen to Kathy and David's baby?

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The Usual Suspects

(Harlem, 1982)

Like rabbits in a cage. Just as I hoped.
—Colonel Mathieu, in the film *The Battle of Algiers*

Kathy Boudin escorted by Rockland County sheriffs after the Brink's robbery, November 24, 1981.

If my family's resurfacing in 1980 had seemed almost quaintly anachronistic—a blast from the past of 1960s nostalgia—the Brink's robbery a year later felt more like a literal explosion: the detonation of a landmine from a long-forgotten war.

Police were understandably enraged by the brutal deaths of two of their own. They were determined to bring the perpetrators to justice, and law enforcement cast a wide net for anyone even peripherally associated with the robbery—not only the perpetrators themselves, but their allies and comrades. And in the weeks that followed, the dominoes finally started to fall for the last remaining fugitives of the revolutionary undergrounds.

Three days after the robbery, Action 5 members Sekou Odinga and Samuel Smith (a.k.a. Mtayari Shabaka Sundiata) were spotted driving together through Queens. Cornered by cops in a nearby construction yard, the two men ditched their car and engaged police in a shootout—both men were heavily armed and wore paramilitary gear and bulletproof vests—but they were vastly outnumbered and quickly overwhelmed. Sundiata was fatally wounded, and Sekou was arrested and taken to the 112th Precinct for processing.

Later that night, when cops finally brought Sekou's unconscious body to the prison ward at Kings County Hospital, doctors found him covered in bruises and cigarette burns, and his pancreas ruptured.

"They had me cuffed," Sekou later told a judge. "My ankles cuffed, shackles on my feet, and my hands cuffed behind my back, and then they jumped on me, threw me down, one of them sat on my stomach. They were kicking me in the nuts, kicking me in the ribs . . . They burned me. They pulled out my toenails."

Detectives, meanwhile, had traced another abandoned getaway car used in the Brink's robbery to a safehouse apartment in East Orange, New Jersey, where they found a cache of evidence: pistols, wigs, a bloody mattress, "bomb-making manuals and materials, diagrams of six Manhattan police-precinct houses, and a 'hit list' of multinational corporations."

They also found Kathy's wallet, containing a collection of ID bearing different names and a phone number she had jotted down on a napkin. And those two scraps of evidence unraveled everything else.

* * *

Former Weather Underground members Jeff Jones and Eleanor Stein were now living in the Bronx with their four-year-old son, my best friend and fellow Weather Kid, Thai. And even though Jeff had invented the inversion strategy and argued strenuously that he and other fugitives should surface,

he and Eleanor hadn't quite gotten around to turning themselves in. They were still living underground.

"Around six in the evening," Eleanor told me, "our phone rang. And I don't think our phone had ever rung in the year that we lived in this apartment."

Jeff picked up the phone. A man's voice on the line—"Is this Jeff Jones?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Larry Wack," the man said. "I'm a special officer with the FBI. We have your apartment surrounded. We have men on the rooftops; we're heavily armed; and we're coming in through your front door."

"Jeff put his hand over the phone," Eleanor remembered. "He looked at me and he said, 'We're busted.'"

Suddenly, there was banging on the front door and shouting from the back. "I just want you to know that we're not resisting," Jeff told the FBI agent. "And we have a child in the apartment."

Eleanor, meanwhile, ran to find her four-year-old son. She knelt in front of Thai and took both his hands. "Listen," she said. "Something really bad is going to happen. We're going to be arrested. But we'll be fine. You'll be fine. And we love you."

"That was probably the worst moment of my life," she told me later. "Having to have that conversation with him."

Thai remembers going into his bedroom to find something he might use to protect his parents. "I went into my desk," he told me, "to figure out whether I had anything useful for this situation. And I remember lifting up a pair of child's safety scissors—with the blue plastic protection?—and looking at them and realizing there was really nothing I could do."

Suddenly, dozens of police officers in full SWAT gear—vests, masks, and guns—crashed through the front door and surrounded Jeff, shouting at him to get down, to crawl on the floor.

* * *

My parents didn't realize yet how much danger they were in, even though they were now aboveground; they were still searching for Kathy's kid. They finally tracked him down in the West Village at the home of his grandparents, Kathy's mom and dad, Jean and Leonard Boudin.

“We got a bag of baby clothes and went down and knocked on their door,” my mom told me. “We found Chesa naked on the floor in their living room, and Jean and Leonard trying to figure out how to diaper him. They were devastated, and sad, and just flattened, really.”

“Leonard and Jean were at a point where they should be sitting in a rocking chair, surveying the greatness of their lives,” Bill remembered. “But instead, Leonard was working overtime trying to figure out, ‘How do I save my daughter from a lifetime in prison?’ He couldn’t sleep. He was overwhelmed by it. And Jean was just a puddle of tragedy.”

It was clear that Leonard and Jean were in no shape to raise a toddler; they were in their late sixties and incapacitated by grief and guilt. Leonard, a well-known attorney, was making plans to coordinate the defense in his daughter’s felony murder trial; they didn’t have the energy or emotional bandwidth to adopt a child.

That first day, Bill got down on the floor to play with Chesa. “I rolled the ball back and forth with him,” he told me, “and I played peekaboo. And we liked each other. I thought he was great. So, Bernardine and I took several walks around the block. And we just looked at each other and we said, ‘If we were run over by a bus, who would we want to take our kids?’”

“I wasn’t quite ready to have another baby,” my mom admits. “But I thought—I don’t know why, but I thought three would be good. And I thought [Kathy and David] were in trouble. And we couldn’t really help them. So, this would be a good thing to do for everybody.”

“We had to offer,” Bill agrees. “So we did offer, without much thought, except—here was a kid drowning in a pool. And we had the capacity to pull him out.”

That week, Bernardine wrote a letter to Kathy in jail.

> October 28, 1981
> Dearest Kathy,
> I’m at your parents’ house playing with Chesa and wishing you were me.
>
> He is thriving. I’m very impressed with his spirit, his beauty, and his easy way with all of us grown-ups . . . I know your pain at this cruel separation is terrible and unrelieved, but you can be calm in some spot knowing that he is well.

Bill and I are ready to help raise Chesa in whatever way you feel best. You know we don't make the offer innocently. But we are organized for kids, we have a supportive daycare scene, and we believe in kids knowing about freedom fighters and injustice.

What I'm saying is – count us in.

I love you, sister. Warmest hugs and hope – the future will be better for the children – Bernardine

Chesa moved into our already cramped and overcrowded Harlem apartment when he was not yet eighteen months old—a new sibling dropped on us overnight, overturning our existing relationships, sibling rivalries, and family routines. It took a while for us to get used to it.

"Chesa landed on us like a bomb," Bill says, with only a bit of overstatement. "It was not the family we had planned. It was the family we got."

"When I first arrived," Chesa remembers, "Malik, who's almost exactly my age, said, 'You can't have my ball, you can't have my parents, and you can't have my mommy!' And that was my first welcome to the family."

For me, Chesa's situation—Kathy and David leaving him with a babysitter while they went out to rob an armored car and never came home—was also a vision of my worst nightmare, a living example of how easily I could have lost my own parents the way Chesa lost his. Even now, it brings back those big questions—about what that hypothetical past means about my parents' choices, and our future—and whether I could ever understand or forgive them.

But at the time, it just felt chaotic and scary. Nobody knew how long Chesa would be with us, or what it would mean for him or our family.

And even as we were all adjusting to this new reality, we were hit with a new aftershock from the earthquake of the Brink's robbery. When police searched Kathy's apartment and M19CO's safehouses, they found not only Jeff Jones's phone number but a driver's license in the name of Marjorie A. Rossiter—a woman from West Nyack who was not a member of the underground or even a member of the wider support network, but just a normal, apolitical New York mom. And this made detectives curious: how had Kathy Boudin, this militant underground leftist urban guerrilla, wound up with a legitimate New York driver's license featuring her picture but Marjorie Rossiter's name?

That February, a new story appeared in the New York papers, with an ominous headline for my family:

> **Phony Drivers' Licenses Traced to Defunct Child's Wear Shop**
> Police declined to say Tuesday what role was played by the Upper West Side store where former Weather Underground leader Bernardine Dohrn once worked. But it was the place where, in December 1979, two women paid for purchases by check and gave their drivers' license numbers as identification. Impostors then used the innocent women's names and numbers to obtain duplicate driver's licenses on the pretext that they had been lost. The duplicates served as identification for renting vans used in an aborted armored-car holdup in Greenburgh, N.Y., and in a successful $500,000 armored-car heist in Inwood.

I didn't know about any of this; I was getting ready for kindergarten; I finally had the birth certificate I needed to go to a public school. We were, on paper at least, normal, law-abiding citizens. In pictures from that time, we look like any New York family from the 1980s: big hair, three kids, a station wagon.

But then, I woke up one day in the usual chaos of our morning routine: all of us getting ready together in our cramped one-room apartment, even more crowded now with Chesa part of our family. I remember jostling for a spot at the sink to brush my teeth, pulling on clothes, grabbing my lunchbox, and running down the five flights after my parents on our way to work or school.

I remember we all piled out onto the street together, and there they were: two men, one white and one Black, in rumpled suits and shiny leather shoes, leaning on the hood of a stripped-down Chevy sedan.

I was only five years old, but I'd been taught my entire life how to spot an FBI agent or undercover cop on the street. And I knew, right away—this was the moment I'd been trained for, and dreaded, as long as I could remember.

We had emerged from the underground and stopped running. We had managed to convince ourselves we were safe. We had stopped moving forward. We'd let our guard down. And they had finally caught us.

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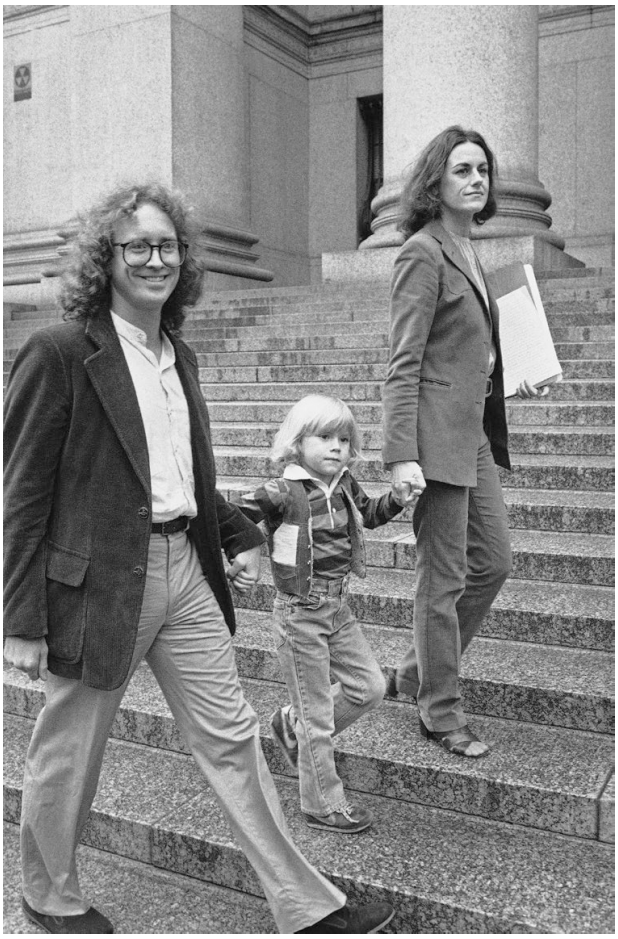
Part 7

Children of the Revolution

It was over for maybe minutes.
Then it was never over.
— Heather McHugh, “Acts of God”



Bernardine Dohrn and Bill Ayers, with “unidentified child” (me) on the courthouse steps in New York, May 16, 1982.

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I’ve Got to Get Out of Here

(Manhattan Correctional Center/Woodbourne Prison, 1982)

Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) is a surreal and unlikely place for a family visit, a twelve-story supermax federal prison rising out of the busy, bustling hive of Chinatown and New York’s financial district, an imposing slab of Brutalist concrete with too few windows for a residential building and no accessible sidewalk space for retail shops. If you didn’t know where to look, you might walk past it without noticing, but once you’ve been inside the building’s purpose is unmistakable.

Later called “the Guantánamo of New York,” MCC has over the years been home to a who’s who of infamous outlaws: John Gotti, Bernie Madoff, “The Blind Sheik” Omar Abdel-Rahman, drug lord Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout, and sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. In fact, it was Epstein’s death at the prison in 2022 that finally prompted the Department of Justice, citing the building’s “critical disrepair,” to shut the place down.

But back in 1982, MCC was a state-of-the-art facility, the only supermax jail operating on the island of Manhattan—and it wound up being an unlikely gathering spot for the last surviving members of the revolutionary undergrounds: eleven incarcerated members of the Black Liberation Army, and my mother.

“New Afrikan Freedom Fighters of the Black Liberation Army honor the alliance we have with our white North American allies!” wrote the BLA in a rare public communiqué that year. “Our respect and commitment goes to our grand jury resisters . . . Their actions as Prisoners of War and political prisoners have shown the world their dedication.”

The day after her imprisonment, Bernardine issued her own public statement—her first since she emerged from the underground. “I am

accused of no crime," she wrote. "I am being jailed for my silence. I will not be coerced into naming names."

Nobody, including the prosecutors, thought Bernardine had been directly involved with the Brink's robbery. What the government wanted was to force her to cooperate in the criminal rackateering case they were building against the BLA—to testify against her friends and break the code of silence that had long protected the underground. In front of the grand jury that week, prosecutors tried to link my mom to the larger conspiracy they were trying to prove, by showing that her job at Broadway Baby had been part of the Black underground's wider support network.

"Ms. Dohrn, can you tell us where you were employed in 1979?" a prosecutor asked.

"I must invoke my constitutional rights," my mom said, "my Fifth Amendment rights, at this point."

"Can you tell us whether you were employed in or around 1980?"

"I am not going to answer your questions on the same basis as before."

"Will you now so comply with the grand jury's direction and the Court order?"

"No. I will not comply."

And with that, District Judge Gerard Louis Goettel ordered Bernardine jailed, in contempt of a grand jury.

* * *

We had weekly visits with her at MCC—in a huge, communal visiting room with dozens of other families, loud and chaotic and full of kids. We weren't allowed to bring anything into the jail, but I'd sneak pocket-sized children's books with me through the metal detectors—*Peter Rabbit*, *In the Night Kitchen*, or *Yertle the Turtle*—tucked into the waistband of my jeans or hidden under my T-shirt, knowing that the guards rarely patted down kids. I wanted my mom to be able to read to me, but more important, I hoped to show my own defiance of the system; I was proud of my little acts of outlaw solidarity.

I wasn't the only one trying to stay close to my mom in jail. Bernardine's mother, my grandma Dorothy, flew up from Florida to visit her daughter. (Barney was too upset, or too angry, to join her.) This was my grandmother's first time in a supermax prison (or any prison at all), her first

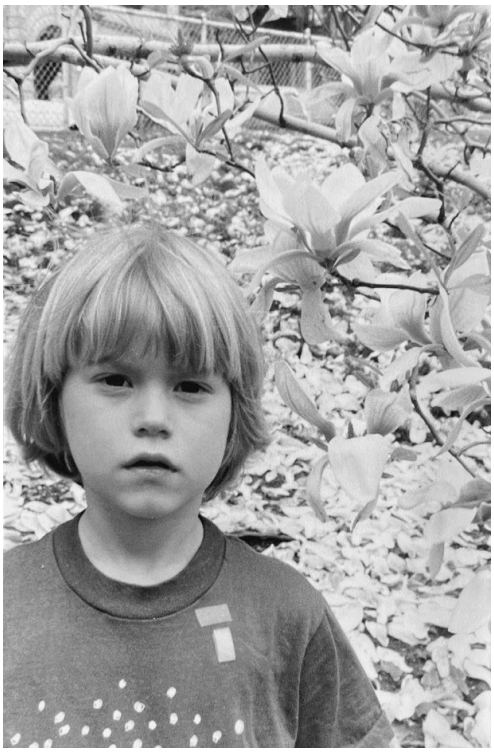
experience being patted down by guards or wanded by a metal detector, as this was long before 9/11 made security screenings mandatory in American airports.

"We held hands and cried for a little bit," my mom remembers. "I was really happy to see her. She wanted to know if she should be afraid of all these women [the other inmates]. I told her no, that they were in a dilemma, like I was in. So, she relaxed. And then she said, 'I have something for you.' And I really did panic—because I didn't know if somebody gave her something, contraband, to give to me? And I said, 'Tell me before you do anything.' And she said, 'Well, it's right here in my bra.' And I said, 'Okay, let me see.' And she had two chocolate chip cookies! Just the thing!"

I find it moving to imagine Dorothy making that choice—to smuggle contraband into a federal lockup. It was probably the first time in her entire life that my grandma intentionally broke a law, just to bring her daughter her favorite treat. In a way, Dorothy and I had made the same decision: baffled by Bernardine's choices, but still trying to understand her, each of us breaking the rules in our own small way just to stay close to her, doing our best to play our assigned roles—as dutiful mother and son—to a daughter and a mother who was always focused on a higher cause.

After each visit, we'd all cry as we said goodbye. My mom would kiss Malik and Chesa and me, give Bill a long hug, and we'd all file back outside to collect our stuff from the lockers in the lobby. Then we'd have to wait on the street corner for twenty or thirty minutes for her to be taken back to her cell.

It felt like a long time. I didn't know it then, but my mom was strip-searched after each of our visits, forced to squat naked and cough in front of the (mostly male) guards to prove she wasn't smuggling contraband back inside. Finally, she would get back to her cell and flash the lights on and off, so we could see the strobe in the window and know which room was hers. And I would wave up at the flashing lights, and know she was looking down at me.



Me, age five, after visiting my mom in jail, c. 1982.

But the nights after our visits were hard. Seeing my mother in MCC stripped our daily routine of its familiarity, removed the possibility of rationalization or denial. It seemed impossible—unreal—that she had to stay in that terrible place, while we were all allowed to leave. And I decided, after each visit, that I had been right, years ago, when I was three or four and we were still driving together through the underground: it wouldn't have been so bad for her to be locked up if only I could have been locked up with her, too.

* * *

As my mom tried to stay strong in MCC, her friend Kathy Boudin, locked up in maximum security Woodbourne Prison upstate, was on the verge of breaking down.

"We live in a cage," Kathy wrote to a friend. "The conditions here are horrendous . . . There is no light in our cells . . . We're separated from the window by bars of our cage and bars on the window. So we get little air – and in any case, never see the sun or sky. They are trying to break us. Politically – spiritually – but more important is the fear of the future – in

particular my relationship to my beautiful child – that is the only hard thing. Really my heart feels cracked open when I think of this."

Kathy's parents had brought her son Chesa to visit her a few months after her arrest, and their reunion was a nightmare. Kathy wasn't allowed to touch her fourteen-month-old child. "If you touch him even once," the guards told her, "the visit will be discontinued." So every time Chesa reached for her, Kathy had to flinch away. Eventually Chesa stopped responding at all, refusing even to look at his mother during their hour-long visits.

Kathy, of course, was not an innocent victim; her actions during the Brink's robbery had helped rob other children of their parents, other parents of their children. But her toddler son Chesa, like those family members, was just collateral damage, caught in the crossfire—and he couldn't understand why any of this had happened.

"I was still breastfeeding when they were arrested," he told me later. "I was fourteen months old, and they were really all I knew. And then to be in a room with her, trying to process the feelings—abandonment and shame and being unlovable and blaming myself—I couldn't understand. Was it because of me? Was it something I had done wrong?"

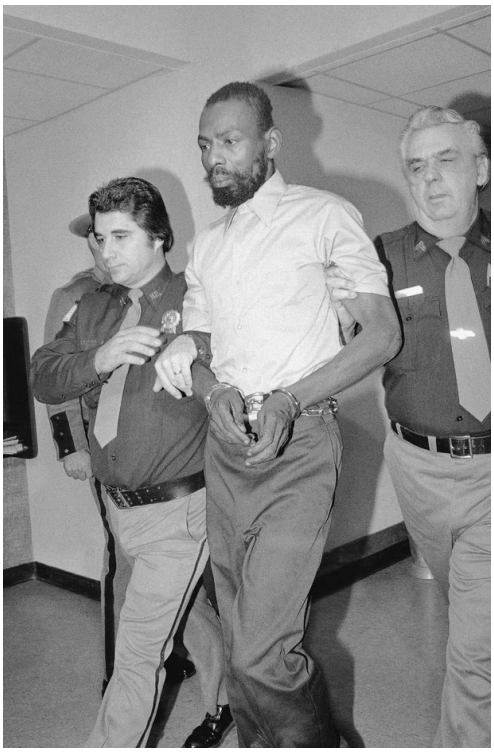
Unable to articulate or process any of it, instead of crying or having tantrums Chesa started having convulsions. His body would become rigid, his eyelids fluttered, and his eyes would roll back in his head—it looked like he was dying. We took him to the hospital, and doctors diagnosed what they called absence seizures, a form of mild epilepsy. (The "absence" refers to absence of consciousness, but seems poetically appropriate given Chesa's absent parents.) But these "mild" episodes were still terrifying. And for Kathy, her baby's sudden-onset neurological disorder must have felt like a divine punishment.

A visitor to the jail that month overheard her sobbing and pleading with her partner, David, in his own cell down the hall, "I've got to get out of here!"

When the FBI learned of Kathy's misery, agents visited her to see if she was now desperate enough to cooperate. She told them she was willing to do almost anything—plead guilty, denounce her role in the crime, apologize directly to the victims' families—but she wouldn't testify against her Black comrades. That was the one bridge she still wouldn't cross.

The feds turned her down. They didn't need Kathy's help; they already had an informant inside the group.

BLA soldier Samuel Brown was in rough shape following his arrest. He'd been beaten nearly to death in jail; police and corrections officers had quickly singled him out as the "cop killer" who murdered Officer Waverly Brown. The beatings had dislocated Samuel's spine and left him with three fractured vertebrae in his neck. He could barely walk or sit up and was in constant, agonizing pain.



Rockland police escort Samuel Brown to jail, November 23, 1981.

Worse, his mind was starting to go. When prison doctors interviewed Samuel the week after the robbery, they reported that he "appeared calm initially but as [the interview] progressed, he became agitated, his speech disjointed and marked by loosening of associations." They diagnosed him with an "acute psychotic episode" and "schizotypal personality disorder."

On December 6, guards reported Samuel "yelling, banging fists on wall and cell door—saying he is going to tear up cell. Agitation and anxiety noted. Patient crying uncontrollably and yelling."

Around this time, FBI agents paid Samuel a visit in jail. He was desperate and cringing, begging them for help—to treat his broken neck,

and to give him something for his pain.

"He was broken," remembers his co-defendant David Gilbert. "He was in incredible pain, and they wouldn't give him treatment. I was beaten, threatened, and all that, but it's not the same as torture. He was tortured."

Finally, Samuel agreed to aid the FBI's investigation—to "provide the federal authorities with information concerning details of the preparation and execution of the October 20, 1981, armed bank robbery." A few weeks later, he punched out a fluorescent light fixture in his cell and used the broken glass to lacerate his cheeks and slit his wrists. A prison doctor was called to his cell at 2:30 a.m. because "Mr. Brown . . . heard voices defaming his God."

Samuel Brown had lost touch with reality; he was paranoid and delusional, physically and mentally broken. But despite his suicide attempt, despite his telling guards that he was "hearing a voice over the prison loudspeakers saying, 'Fuck God' and that people were coming to harm him," doctors continued to sign off on his use as an informant. And once Samuel Brown agreed to cooperate, the code of silence that had long sustained the underground crumbled.

Tyrone Rison, a founding member of the Action 5, was willing to go to prison for his crime, but, like Kathy, he was desperate to protect his kids, and his wife had been arrested as a potential accessory in the Brink's robbery, leaving their children without either parent. When Tyrone was allowed a phone call from jail, he called his mother-in-law in Georgia to speak to his children—a call that was recorded by the FBI. "While talking to his oldest son," agents reported, "[Tyrone] became emotional and told him he thought he had gotten them out of all this mess and was sorry."

The feds visited Tyrone in prison, too—they now knew how to exert maximum leverage—and offered him a deal. In exchange for his testimony, his wife would be released, and she and their young children would be placed in the federal witness protection program. He would have to betray his friends, but at least his wife would be free and his children would grow up with their mother. Tyrone took the deal.

The other defendants referred to these informants as snitches, puppets, and traitors. They pointed out that Samuel Brown was an unreliable witness, since he was clearly not in his right mind. They said Tyrone Rison had admitted to skinning a Vietnamese woman alive when he was in the army, and claimed that he was the shooter responsible for killing Brink's

guard Peter Paige during the robbery, while Paige was lying defenseless on the ground.

It didn't matter. The feds didn't need snitches to convict the crew responsible for the Brink's job, most of whom had been caught red-handed. Their aim was not to secure convictions of the Action 5 but to break the code of silence, prosecute the larger RICO conspiracy, and go after the wider support network.

* * *

On Father's Day that year, my mom sent Bill a Hallmark card with a cheesy printed poem "For the Man I Married" (they weren't married—the card was meant to be an ironic joke). "I thought you'd be tickled by a schmaltzy prison card somebody gave me," she scribbled in the margin. "The point is I love you madly."

Bernardine was suffering, and lonely, though she remained defiant in public. And her letters to my father from jail are fascinating to me, now, after decoding the mystery of the distance and separation of their preceding years. They're intimate and vulnerable, very unlike her public persona—and some almost embarrass me to read. But they also show a side of my mother that's important to understanding how she dealt with their separation, and ours, and her evolving sense of her own purpose and independence.

> Dearest one, here's a note to tell you that I will never forget your devotion and care during these terrible weeks. I know you have taken a toll on yourself to have consistently been so loving and reassuring to me and to the babes – who depend so heavily on you. And to be a whirlwind organizer at the same time. I think you are a miracle and I – the luckiest person alive to be loving you.

Another:

> I always mentally picture us all on the big bed when I search for an image of security. That's pretty romantic of me I know, since I do remember the nights of resenting the crowd and not being able to roll over and the intrusions into our romantic life. But from here that

> crowd of sweet smelly sweaty bodies seems like heaven and I long for its return.

And more:

> Dearest love, some days I'm overwhelmed with all the feelings and thoughts I want to share with you. Though you have not asked for it, I probably don't tell you all the ways I keep coming to love you more – especially your genius with the kids. They are clearly thriving and growing – we both know they have suffered and that this will take its toll [but] remember we decided to have children with full knowledge of the precipice. And though they have changed us in ways we couldn't have contemplated, we always intended that they grow up knowing about the world around them and hating injustice.

Her political commitment hadn't changed, but the feelings she shares in these letters are surprisingly simple and primal: nostalgia, loneliness, fear, love. They show a basic emotional interdependence between my parents I had never seen before. Jail had apparently stripped away some of the barriers Bernardine had tried to build as she worked to remake her identity during the political crisis of the early days of their partnership. Part of this was that she was simply more desperate and vulnerable than she'd ever been before. And the other part was that she was clearly worried about her partner.

"I want you to find ways to nourish yourself & gather strength," she wrote to Bill later that year. "Not working, less meetings, more running; however you decide – but you can't be the assuring carer of love for the kids if you are too ragged."

She was right to be worried. Because while Bernardine tried to stay strong in MCC, back home, Bill was falling apart.

All that year, my father had been parenting on his own, and all three of his kids were reeling from abandonment and loss. Chesa first, but Malik and I had now lost our mother as well. And Chesa had been hit twice; just as he was starting to adjust to his new second family, his adopted mother also suddenly disappeared.

We all had nightmares. We sometimes wet the bed, and Bill had to carry all three of us, with a heavy bag of sodden sheets and pajamas, down five

flights of stairs to the coin-op laundromat across the street.

Our days felt long. We spent eight or ten hours a day at our preschool, where Bill was now de facto co-director of the daycare. He'd stay late, helping to clean up the playroom, talking to parents, managing the accounts, and we'd usually leave after dark, grab a quick dinner at the West End Bar, where Weatherman Brian Flanagan was now the bartender (our radical bubble could make New York feel like a very small world), and then Bill would carry all three of us back up the five flights to our apartment by himself, me and Malik in his arms, Chesa up on his shoulders, bags of diapers and baby food dangling from our father's fingers. I remember the sound of his breathing during those long climbs, and his arms shaking with the effort as he carried us all.

"I would joke about it," Bill told me. "I'd say, 'How does he do it? How does he do it? He's so strong,' you know? The physical demands of single parenting are just staggering. They're *staggering* . . . But more intense than that was the sense that you could never be off the clock. It was *me*, emotionally, that everyone depended on. It was exhausting. And I felt like I was losing it."

I didn't know it at the time, but my father turned to speed and cocaine that year to make it through those long days, to manage his relentless schedule, and to self-medicate his depression and despair. "I was pretty much addicted to cocaine for a year," he admitted. "I don't know if I was addicted, but I really liked it. It got me going in the day, and I had a horribly difficult day."

Finally, he went to a psychiatrist for help, telling her that he thought he was depressed and needed medication.

"You don't need pills," the shrink told him. "You don't need therapy. Your girlfriend is in jail. You're raising three kids alone. Your life sucks. Bill, you're not *depressed*. You need something to change."

"Dear Friends," Bill wrote in a desperate letter to friends and supporters that fall.

> Bernardine has had some hard days but is doing better and is determined to see this through. The kids have been shook up and are clinging to me (and I to them). I'm in pain, somewhat amazed at how hard it is – not single parenting specifically, but doing it alone in such rotten emotional shape. I've never felt so powerless and

depressed. I want to be strong for the kids, but I think just holding them, crying with them, being emotionally honest is the best I can do.

What can you do? Even if you've written in the past, send the enclosed postcards to [D.A.] Martin and [Judge] Goettel, and let them see the faces of three of the victims of this witchhunt.

L to R: Chesa, me, and Malik, eating Italian ices in Harlem. Photo included in Bill's "Dear Friends" letter, 1982.

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Joan of Arc and Mary Poppins

(Harlem, 1982–83)

One life is all we have, and we live it as we believe in living it, and then it's gone.

—Joan of Arc, speech at her trial, 1431

JANE: Mary Poppins, don't you love us?
MARY POPPINS: And what would happen to me, may I ask, if I loved all the children I said goodbye to?

—*Mary Poppins*, 1964

Bernardine reading her marriage vows, October 1982.

In October 1982, after six months of separation, only seeing each other once a week in the visiting room, my parents finally decided to get married.

This was a big surprise to all of us, including them. Ever since her first boyfriend, Bob Okin, back at the University of Chicago, my mother had

been vocally, adamantly opposed to the entire institution of marriage. She had never wanted to be a bride or to become anyone's wife.

Of course, she had never wanted to be a mother, either. Time, and circumstances, had apparently changed her on nearly everything.

"I think your mom just felt really vulnerable," my preschool teacher Bj Richards told me. "She wanted that connection to Bill. I don't think it was for any legal reason. I think it was more an emotional connection."

That October, Judge Goettel granted Bernardine a furlough—two days of supervised release—to hold a wedding. We gathered in the apartment of a left-wing lawyer friend on the Upper West Side, with two plainclothes cops parked on the street to keep an eye on us (one Black and one white, I noticed, in a Chevy sedan conspicuously stripped of ornaments, except for its souped-up radio antenna).

The celebration itself was bittersweet. This was the first time my mother had been out of jail since her subpoena—her first chance to wear her own clothes, or eat what she wanted, to hold us on her lap for more than a few minutes at a time—and we all knew it was less than forty-eight hours before she had to go back to jail.

Bill's wedding vows spoke directly to the emotional dissonance of the day. "It is a sad statement on the world we live in that joy and happiness and celebration are squeezed in between pain and suffering and heartbreak," he told Bernardine. "Here we are in celebration and ceremony, affirming our love and commitment to one another, to our children in front of family and friends, and yet we must have our moment of freedom and joy between months of painful separation and unjust imprisonment.

Bill and Bernardine at their wedding during a prison furlough, October 1982.

“I feel blessed with Bernardine as my partner,” he went on, “because she is a person who challenges me and inspires me every day to be a better person, clearer, stronger, more courageous—more like her. And I feel blessed to be marrying the mother of our children, the woman who conceived two beautiful children, and then had the courage, optimism and compassion to take a third child, who needed a home, into our family.”

Bernardine’s vows that day had their own distinctive tension and contradiction—very characteristic of her—weaving together the personal with the political, insisting, even in a traditional ceremony of love and unity, on her own fierce, uncompromising independence. “We are together here today to celebrate that ritual which is mutual, joyful and communal,” she told Bill. “I happily affirm our pledge of love and caring before friends and family. But throughout history, marriage has also carried another meaning and continues to be a means of degrading and diminishing women. I disavow all custom and law which relegates women to the status of property or slave. I disclaim the view taught to young girls that marriage is the primary function or destiny of women. I reject all obligations which are not mutual, and the intervention of the state into the physical, social and spiritual well-being of women and children.”

These were unconventional vows—it was an unconventional partnership, defined as much by revolutionary solidarity as romantic love—but they were heartfelt. My parents kissed. We cheered. And my mom went back to jail.

* * *

Bill was married now, but still on his own, still with three kids to take care of. And one of his kids was in profound crisis; even compared to the rest of us, it quickly became clear, my adopted brother Chesa needed help.

"Chesa's temper tantrums would go on for hours and days," Bill remembers. "I never heard the word PTSD at that point. But he absolutely seemed traumatized. One morning we woke up and I found Chesa in the living room looking at the corner of a wall. Like he was staring at the wall, rocking back and forth. And I thought, *holy crap*, you know, *he's in real trouble*."

My kid brother Chesa, with his grandfather Leonard Boudin, at my fifth birthday party, Central Park, April 1982.

Chesa couldn't make sense of what had happened to him, why he'd been abandoned so abruptly and without explanation. He was right at the age when toddlers start to assert their independence, to walk a few steps ahead of their mother, always checking over their shoulder to make sure she's still there, watching. And then, suddenly, she wasn't. People used to say to us, "Well, at least he's only fourteen months old, so he doesn't really understand what's going on. He won't even remember it." But anyone who's spent time around kids knows how wrong that is. They know.

When our own daughters were fourteen months old, my wife, Rachel, and I talked all the time about my brother, thinking back on how painful that separation must have been—for Kathy and David, but especially for Chesa himself. As our girls toddled away from us, always checking back over their shoulders to make sure we were watching them, still there, it was hard to imagine a more critical moment—a moment when kids are more reliant on their parents' presence, more fully aware of the central importance of their mother and father in their lives.

Chesa's seizures continued; he would sometimes go blank for a few seconds, just lose focus and drift off in the middle of a game or mid-sentence. And he had fits of rage—scary bursts of sudden, all-consuming anger that would blow up out of nowhere and leave our fragile family feeling like it was constantly on the brink of collapse.

"I remember he would have episodes," my brother Malik told me. "Like when he flipped out on one of his teachers, Mr. Feldman? He got mad about something and ran off, jumped a fence, tore his shirt, tried to run all the way home. I remember talking to him afterwards, being like, 'What the hell was that about? Dude, I saw you running away from the school. It's the middle of the day! Can't you just calm down, like go get a drink of water or something?'"

Chesa's problems were dramatic; it was easy to focus on them. But Malik and I were suffering, too. "Mom wasn't around," Malik adds. "And Bill was taking care of us full-time. My very earliest memory, in some weird way, is just that. That mom's not there."

I asked him whether he thought he and I had been damaged by that experience, the way Chesa clearly had been. Malik thought about it for a while.

"I was a pretty scared kid," he said finally. "Like, there were a lot of things that set me off. Being alone in the dark? Dark movie theaters? And if I think about it now, it's like, *yeah*, *duh* . . . Or what about the fact that you drank out of a milk bottle until you were like, ten years old? Freaking weird, right?"

I don't remember this. It surprised me when he reminded me of it and we laughed about it, but he's right—I looked back at our family pictures, and I'm often holding a bottle. I don't think I was quite ten, but there's no doubt I hung onto it way longer than was appropriate. Looking back, it's clear that all three of us were traumatized by our mothers' absence. We not

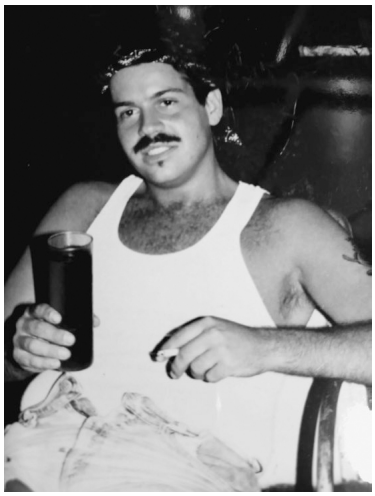
only had nightmares but fits of malaise—what we might now call depression—days or weeks when we didn't want to get up in the morning, didn't want to go to school, didn't want to do anything at all.

Finally, my father cracked. Buckling under the emotional demands of our family, addicted to speed and cocaine just to get through his days, and nearly out of his mind with grief and loneliness and worry, Bill reached out to an unlikely source for help.

* * *

Peter Milanovich was then a twenty-two-year-old part-time teacher at our alternative preschool—a self-described "gay disco bunny" from Williamsburg, Brooklyn (long before the area was hip or gentrified or remotely queer-friendly). He had grown up in a traditional Italian immigrant family but came out at sixteen and moved to Manhattan to "find himself." By 1982, Peter was taking classes part-time at Brooklyn College, working at our preschool during the day, and partying until dawn almost every night at Studio 54.

Peter was looking for a place to stay—he'd been couch-surfing with friends and random hookups all year—and Bill was desperate for help with his kids. So, in 1982, Peter moved his few bags into our crowded apartment in Harlem and became our full-time nanny.



Peter Milanovich, c. 1983.

“I would bring you guys down to the Village with me all the time,” Peter told me when I asked him what it was like to be our caregiver. “Like after school, for a bite to eat? We’d go to the Riviera Cafe and sit in the window. And in the summer, when it was warm, I would walk you all the way down to the Christopher Street pier, and we’d sit out and look at the water. And, of course, I was getting hit on: ‘Oh my god, are these boys yours?’ and I’d go, ‘No, unfortunately not. No, I’m their Mary fucking Poppins, okay?’”

Peter didn’t look much like Mary Poppins—he dressed in combat boots and short jean shorts, wore a thick mustache and spoke in a gruff, sing-song accent that sounded equal parts Italian Williamsburg and Broadway diva/drag queen. On Halloween, he took us trick-or-treating in the East Village; I was dressed as Robin Hood and Peter was a “naughty nun,” in fishnet stockings, stiletto heels, and (he told me later), after he dropped us off with Bill and went back out alone for the night, a 24-inch dildo tucked underneath his nun’s habit. “I would jump on a car, lift up my skirt, and there was this huge thing,” he remembers. “Yeah, and it stopped traffic.”

At first, everybody assumed Bill and Peter were a couple—and they did nothing to disabuse people of the idea. When bigots confronted us or shouted slurs in the street (which happened shockingly often in 1982, even in New York City), Bill or Peter would shout back, “Yeah, we’re faggots, so fucking what?”

Peter didn’t consider himself political. He was too young to remember the Vietnam War or the civil rights movement; he’d never heard of the Weather Underground. But in his own way, he was a rebel and an outlaw —“a rogue,” is the way he puts it—and he naturally rose to the occasion.

“I could always hear the clicking in the background [of a phone call],” he told me. “The phone was totally tapped. I had a lot of fun with this, because I would have some really racy conversations with some friends of mine, if you know what I mean. So, they [the FBI] got an earful. I didn’t hear them hang up then! You know, then I didn’t hear the click! There’s some really heavy-duty recordings of me somewhere, I can only imagine.”

Somehow, Peter’s raunchy irreverence helped us get through those impossible days; in a time when my brothers and I were lost in a gray haze of loneliness and my dad was alone in the dark, Peter was the jolt of light and Technicolor we didn’t even know we needed. He became part of our

found family, a dedicated, dependable parent, and something like a surrogate mom.

"I never had children on my own," Peter told me recently, "but I always considered you were in part my kids. Because I know what it's like to get up at two o'clock in the morning and make a bottle and change a diaper. I've led a really charmed, fabulous life. But the year I spent with you guys was really at the top."

After just a few months of living with us, Peter started taking me and Malik and Chesa on trips to visit our parents in jail—downtown to see Bernardine at MCC, and upstate to see Kathy and David at Woodbourne. Having our nanny with us made those visits seem almost like a fun adventure—in fact, it helped that Peter wasn't political, that he didn't give a shit about the movement or the cause or the revolution. He was, like us kids, fundamentally non-ideological, and his blunt, honest, emotional response to our situation could be strangely validating.

"I really didn't get the full impact [of the Brink's robbery] until I walked through the gates [of Woodbourne]," Peter told me. "Like, when that gate clanged shut. And that was the first time I met David and Kathy. Kathy was a really calm and intense person. David was this adorable teddy bear. Oh, my God, I had such a crush on David Gilbert! And I'm sitting there, and I'm watching them interact with their son. And the first thing that went through my head was, 'How could they do this? How could they do this to this angelic—' I would never have left him, for anything. Ever! I don't care. I don't care how important you thought it was, I would never, ever have sacrificed this child. I would never have that deep of a conviction of *anything*."

* * *

If my nanny Peter was a bit like Mary Poppins—with his sudden, almost miraculous arrival in our motherless home, and his unique mix of impish transgression and maternal warmth—my mom herself seemed precisely the opposite: distant, icy, and determined—a stone cold revolutionary martyr, far removed from any traditionally feminine caregiving role, determined to sacrifice herself for the cause.

And as the months of incarceration stretched toward a year, the officials in Bernardine's case were starting to agree: they were dealing here with a

zealot, someone who would never surrender, or cooperate with the government, no matter what. "[She] is intractable in her views and beliefs to the point of fanaticism," the judge in the case wrote, "[and] may well perceive herself as a second Joan of Arc."

The American legal system had finally discovered what I had always known—that my mother was prepared to spend the rest of her life in prison, or even be burned at the stake, for what she believed. But poetically—or perversely—this meant she wouldn't have to. Because it turns out that a grand jury is only allowed to hold a witness in contempt to compel her testimony, not to punish her for noncompliance. This is a fine distinction but a critical one, since incarceration without conviction is unconstitutional. And when that fine line is crossed—if a judge finds that coercion of a witness has shaded into prosecution—further punishment becomes illegal.

"Dohrn has now been confined at the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) for seven months," Judge Goettel reluctantly concluded at the beginning of the next year. "Throughout this time, she has remained adamant in her refusal . . . to cooperate with the grand jury in any way. It has become increasingly clear to this Court that Dohrn's recalcitrance will continue. And that further incarceration will not compel her to cooperate."

And so, on January 3, 1983, he ordered my mother released from jail.

I wasn't in the courtroom that day, but I remember the party we had that night—at an Italian restaurant downtown. I remember the pasta with red sauce I ordered, and the red and white checkered cloths on the tables. I remember sitting on my mom's lap for hours, while her lawyers and friends ate and drank and told stories and made toasts as my eyelids got heavier and heavier. And I finally fell asleep.

After my mom came home, Peter had to move out. There wasn't space in our tiny apartment for six, and we no longer needed our Mary Poppins—we had our real mother back. For me, this was bittersweet. Peter was the lifeline that got me and my brothers through a painful ordeal. And he had given us a glimpse of an existence, and a point of view, outside the insular perspective of our family—a first hint, for me, that not everyone had to commit their lives to making a revolution; that there were, actually, other ways to live.

But as it turned out, that year with our family had changed Peter, too. "Bill inspired me," he told me. "Just to be in that atmosphere. I joined Act Up! It was the beginning of a very long, horrible time for me and my

community. I was twenty-three when my boyfriend, Michael, died, who was only twenty-six. It was just a horrific and scary time. I remember going to rallies, holding a sign with Michael's name on it. And [it was] just associating and being part of your family that really gave me the energy—the *gusto* or whatever—to try to be as impactful as I could."

* * *

With her own trial fast approaching, Kathy Boudin finally decided to plead guilty—partly because she *was* guilty, racked with remorse over the men who were killed in the Brink's robbery, and partly because she was desperate to find her way out of prison one day.

"What will happen if I get a long sentence," she wondered in a letter to her parents. "What will my relationship to Chesa be? Will I be his mother? What does it mean to be a mother who does not raise her own child?"

Kathy told prosecutors that she would apologize for her role in the robbery and do what she could to make restitution for her crimes. She still wasn't willing to turn on her friends, but she would otherwise do her best to cooperate, to atone for her guilt, in order to reduce her own sentence so that she might someday rejoin her child.

But her partner, David, remained steadfastly determined to follow the Black vanguard, wherever it led—to be a loyal foot soldier in the war for Black liberation. And he, like his BLA co-defendants, not only refused to make a deal, they insisted they were political prisoners and freedom fighters, and declined to put up any defense at all.

This was, in part, a continuation of the solidarity between Black and white radicals—to refuse to cooperate with what they saw as the racist American justice system. But I now think it also reflected an almost suicidal hopelessness and despair on the part of the Brink's defendants. They were all facing life in prison. They had given up everything for the struggle. To renounce it now—to cooperate with a system they had spent their lives trying to overthrow—would make that sacrifice meaningless.

Kathy was the only Brink's defendant to plead guilty and ask for leniency. And when the sentences came down, they were predictably harsh. Sekou Odinga, who had declined to participate in the robbery, was found guilty of multiple counts of conspiracy in the earlier BLA bank heist spree,

each charge carrying a twenty-year sentence. He would ultimately serve more than three decades in prison.

Mutulu Shakur was sentenced to sixty years. Marilyn Buck was given eighty. Both died of cancer, on compassionate-release furloughs after decades behind bars. David Gilbert, Judith Clark, and Kuwasi Balagoon were each handed three consecutive life sentences, one for each of the men killed in the robbery, with no possibility of parole. Even Samuel Brown, who cooperated with the government and testified against his friends, was sentenced to seventy-five years. Prosecutors took advantage of his injuries and mental fragility to break him; they befriended him, used him as an informant, and then abandoned him to his fate.

Samuel remains behind bars to this day, more than forty-five years later.

On the day David was convicted, he and Kathy got married in the Orange County jail. David was about to be transferred to a maximum-security men's prison, and they both thought they would never see each other again.

Kathy's father, Leonard Boudin, who was coordinating her defense, asked his new son-in-law to testify in court—to swear under oath that Kathy hadn't known about the Brink's heist, that he had only told her they were going to be transporting fugitives and she had no idea an armed robbery was going to take place. But after speaking to his co-defendants, David decided that testifying was impossible; saving his new wife would amount to cooperation with the government and a betrayal of the cause. "There was discussion about whether I could testify for Kathy," he told me. "The problem is, then they're going to ask me about who did what, and who did this? You know, I can't rat on people."

Over and over, you can see this same pattern, repeated: asked to choose between solidarity and family, revolution and love, my parents and their comrades chose the cause almost every time. This bothered me for a long time—it still bothers me, as a son and as a father—but I've come to think that, in my parents' minds, the two ideas are inseparable: the fight to build a better world *is* a manifestation of their love and hope for the future; the revolution itself is a birthright to pass on to their children and their children's children. Or, as my mother put it in a statement to the court before her release, "I believe that it is necessary for me to resist. Partly because of how I want to raise my children . . . I have a very intense desire that our children grow up in a better world than we have now offered."

Kathy, in her own sentencing statement following her guilty plea, spoke directly to this tension and contradiction—her continued ambivalence about being both a mother and a revolutionary, and how those two identities both contradicted and reinforced each other. "I remain essentially the same person I have always been," she told the court. "Perhaps the biggest difference—aside from a few gray hairs—is that I am now a mother with a beautiful child. Having a child, in some ways, makes one want to fight harder for change. In others, it can make one more conservative, because of the risks that struggle brings . . . I don't like being in jail. No one does. But the meaning of my life has always come from being part of a worldwide tradition of fighting for a more just and humane world. My ideals still give me strength—yesterday, today, and tomorrow."

Kathy was sentenced to twenty years to life in prison. Her guilty plea had given her a glimmer of hope of eventual release, but by the time she was eligible for parole, her toddler son, my baby brother Chesa, would be twenty-three years old.

I asked my father recently if he ever thought about how narrowly he and my mom had escaped Kathy and David's fate—how close they had come to destroying our family. One wrong turn, one suspicious police officer deciding to pull Bill over at a checkpoint, and he could have been like David, locked up for life for driving a van. And my mom could easily have ended up like Kathy, convicted as an accessory and sent to prison for decades. In that parallel universe, I might have grown up like Chesa, losing both my parents when I was still a child.

"Do you ever feel, how lucky you were?" I asked my dad. "Or kind of, there but for the grace of God?"

"Every fucking minute," he answered right away. "Every minute. I am seventy-six years old, and I have felt the most vivid sense of having survived and squeaked through again and again and again. The sense Bernardine and I always had was, there but for fortune. Because we were all living on the edge."

As it turns out, most of the remaining members of the revolutionary undergrounds carry this deep survivor's guilt—an uncomfortable sense of how random and strange it is that they made it out relatively unscathed, while their closest friends saw their lives implode.

Weatherwoman Naomi Jaffe remembers Chesa asking her, when he was still a toddler, why his parents were in jail. Why the rest of us—me and

Malik, and the other Weather Kids and Panther Cubs he knew—still had our moms and dads around to take care of us, while he was all alone. In that moment, Naomi was speechless; she couldn't think of anything to say to this devastated child. But years later, she thought of a possible response: "Wait, while I sob my heart out," she imagined herself telling Chesa, "and I'll try to give you an answer. They did what we all did, only for a minute longer."

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Caregivers

(Sun City, Florida, 1984–87)

Revolution is a serious thing, the most serious thing about a revolutionary's life. When one commits oneself to the struggle, it must be for a lifetime.

—Angela Davis

After my mother's release from MCC, our family went down to Florida, to visit our grandparents once more in their gated retirement community of Sun City. Barney and Dorothy were thrilled to see us, and to have Bernardine out of jail. It felt like a family reunion, and a vacation. They even took us to Disney World.

Our family had survived; almost miraculously, after a decade on the run, we had emerged alive and relatively unscathed. My mother was finally out of jail; my grandparents had forgiven her. But then my aunt Jennifer decided to get married. And this, unexpectedly, once again tore our family apart.

"I told my parents I fell in love with this person," Jennifer told me. "And he was dean of a law school. And he was Black. Because I knew my father was going to have a hard time with that. But I also kind of felt maybe, with Haywood's credentials? I mean, you're getting the lawyer you always wanted!"

Jennifer's first husband and the father of her three children, Mickey Melendez, was a Puerto Rican revolutionary—a member of the Young Lords activist street gang, which had been, along with Bernardine's SDS, part of Fred Hampton's Rainbow Coalition. Mickey was, to put it mildly, an unconventional match. But Mickey somehow got along with his conservative in-laws. "My mother always said he was a nice guy and not marriage material," laughs Jennifer. "Which was true! Very prophetic of my mom. But they were always nice to him."

To my grandparents, Mickey must have seemed a bit like Desi Arnaz to their daughter's Lucille Ball—an immigrant and outsider, but for all that, a relatively familiar American type. Barney and Dorothy could tolerate their daughter being married to a Puerto Rican. Her second husband, Haywood Burns, on the other hand—a Black Harvard-educated attorney and dean of CUNY Law School—was intolerable. My grandfather's deep-seated racism, which had smoldered almost invisibly under the surface of our family for years, suddenly caught fire.

"He said he would never meet him," Jennifer remembers. "He never wanted to meet him. I was no longer his daughter. I no longer existed for him."

Barney Dohrn, who had run away from his own parents at fifteen and spent most of his life trying to build his own perfect American family from scratch—who had his own "mixed" marriages, and who changed his name to protect his daughters from the stigma of his ethnic background—found the interracial marriage of his youngest daughter an intolerable betrayal. He disinherited her (not that he owned much of value beyond a used car and a heavily mortgaged bungalow), and refused to acknowledge her as his child.

It didn't make sense. But he apparently couldn't help himself. "It's just the way I was raised," he told my mother, trying to explain his anger.

"I understand that, Dad," Bernardine told him. "But sometimes you have to move beyond how you were raised."

And with that, she stopped speaking to him. She took her sister's side and cut her father off completely, as if she were expelling a counter-revolutionary from her organization. And our family—which had stayed relatively intact over more than a decade of conflict and the strain of an FBI manhunt—fell apart.

For my grandmother Dorothy, this was a living nightmare. She didn't consider herself political; she would never have criticized her husband for his views. But she was miserable to be estranged from her daughters and unable to see her grandkids.

Every week, my grandma would sneak into the kitchen on Sunday mornings to call us on the phone while Barney barricaded himself in the living room, reading a Book of the Month paperback or watching a Brewers game on TV. We would dutifully pass the receiver around, catching Nana up on our lives, our schoolwork, our karate trophies and Little League games,

and thank her for the ten-dollar bills she sent us faithfully every Christmas and birthday.

It became a routine in our family; it went on like this for years.

But then, slowly, it seemed like even Dorothy had decided to cut us off. She stopped calling the house on Sundays. Our birthdays and graduations passed unnoticed. We didn't hear from her for months, then years.

Finally, Bernardine and Jennifer called their father, together, to ask him what was going on. Why had their mom fallen so deeply out of touch?

"I don't know what's happening," he admitted. "But something's wrong with your mother. Her mind's not right. I need you."

That week, the sisters flew to Florida together to see their mom face to face, and convinced Barney to take his wife to the hospital, where she was diagnosed with presumptive Alzheimer's disease.

And this, surprisingly, brought our family together again. If losing his first wife had turned my grandfather inward, made him harder and more secretive, facing the loss of his second somehow cracked him open again. My grandpa Barney, who had always been chilly and emotionally reserved, now cried easily. He spoke about his feelings. He asked Jennifer to bring her husband down to Florida for a family visit. And my uncle Haywood, in a gesture of incredible grace and generosity, agreed to meet his father-in-law and to forgive him.

"We were at the airport in Fort Lauderdale," Jennifer told me. "And my father says to Haywood, 'I owe you an apology for how I treated you. I really regret it.' And Haywood just opened his arms, and he said, 'That's history. Let's go forward.'"

Over the next few years, my grandpa Barney, whose decades-long marriage had been defined by conservative ideas and traditional gender roles, took on his wife's care himself. For the first time in years—maybe in his entire life—Barney learned to make a meal in his own kitchen. To wash the dishes and to do his own laundry. To bathe his wife in the mornings. To get her dressed and put on her makeup, so she could see her old friends and preserve some of the dignity he knew she would have wanted.

At eighty-nine, my grandfather reinvented himself one last time, and taught himself to be a caregiver. "It was like he freed himself from cement," Jennifer says. "Took till he was eighty-nine, but it's never too late. People can change."

And this, it turns out, was the greatest lesson Barney taught his daughters, and his grandchildren, over his near-century-long protean American existence. People can change. It was a lesson all of us would need to learn, and relearn, for the rest of our lives.

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Grow Up to Be Good Revolutionaries

(Hyde Park, Chicago, 1987–94)

> *Grow up to be good revolutionaries. Remember that it is the Revolution which is important and that each of us, taken in isolation, is worth nothing.*
>
> —Ernesto “Che” Guevara, letter to his children, 1965–66

Me, Malik, Bernardine, and Chesa reading together, c. 1987.

In 1987, my parents decided to move our family to Chicago—back to the city where they were both born, where Barney had run away from home, where my grandpa Tom had become a corporate CEO. Back to Hyde Park, where my mother went to college and met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Muhammad Ali. Back to the site of the 1969 SDS convention and the founding of Weatherman. Back to the streets my parents stormed through during the Days of Rage. Back to where we all surrendered and finally emerged from the underground.

After my mom got out of jail, Bill went back to school, earning his doctorate in early childhood education from Columbia University’s Teachers College. He took a job at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he would work for the next thirty years, teaching young people to be teachers.

Bernardine cast about for a while, searching for a new purpose after the failure of her revolutionary dream. Eventually, she founded a legal clinic at the Northwestern University School of Law: the Children and Family Justice Center, providing pro bono legal defense for kids caught up in Cook County's juvenile justice system.

Both my parents had figured out how to work with, and for, children, finding unexpected new ways to fuse their radical beliefs with their new focus on family.

In fact, once it became clear that violent revolution hadn't succeeded in overthrowing the system, most of the members of the revolutionary undergrounds rededicated their lives to a slower, more incremental sort of progress. Jeff Jones became an activist journalist and Eleanor Stein an administrative judge, both focusing on environmental issues and climate change. Cathy Wilkerson became a high school math teacher and taught in an adult literacy program. Mark Rudd taught math, too, and mentored a new generation of student activists trying to create a new version of Students for a Democratic Society. They all raised kids, took care of parents, and recommitted themselves to the long, painstaking, work of trying to change the world, one difficult step at a time.

Years passed. The kids grew up. And the adults grew old.

My brothers and I went to school. We played in Little League. By the time we were teenagers, our family had what most people would consider a normal middle-class American life.

There were sometimes flashbacks from our radical past: a clicking sound on our phone that could be (or was I just being paranoid?) an FBI wiretap; letters that arrived without a signature or return address, postmarked from Canada or Cuba; phone calls from an operator—"Hello, you have a collect call from an inmate at a New York state correctional facility, will you accept the charges?" But over the years, that past grew more distant and slowly faded away; my mother's face and name, which had been splashed for a decade across Wanted posters and front pages and TV broadcasts, fell out of the news.

Most people we met had never heard of Bernardine Dohrn or the Weather Underground. When our friends and neighbors heard our family's story, the reaction was usually disbelieving and then mildly titillated, as if they'd found out a parent in the PTA had once been a porn star.

The revolution, it seemed, was finally over. My parents—and the country—had moved on.

But the word *revolution*, it turns out, is a contranym—a word that has two meanings that are opposites or somehow contradictory.

revolution
1. a sudden, radical, or complete change
2. a progressive motion of a body around an axis so [it] returns to its initial position

Appropriately, the word contains its own internal tension and poses its own fundamentally radical question: whether change is inherently progressive or cyclical; whether a revolution can truly transform our world, or if it ultimately just brings us back to where we began.

* * *

In 1997, police were called to the home of Wayne Curry, a small-time drug dealer living in Vancouver, Canada. They found an elderly man unable to get out of bed, slowly dying of the malignant melanoma that was eating into his bones. Wayne's skin had become so raw and sensitive that the slightest touch was agony—and as EMTs led him outside to an ambulance, a female police officer patted him gently on the back.

"You're doing fine," she encouraged him. Wayne spun around, delirious with pain, and punched her in the face.

"I told them not to touch him!" said Wayne's common-law wife, Marion MacPherson. "He fought all the way. The police said he was one of the strongest sons of bitches they'd ever seen."

The cops had to strap him to a stretcher to take him to Vancouver General. Eighteen days later, he died in his sleep. Only then did his wife reveal her husband's secret: Wayne Curry was actually John "J.J." Jacobs—the last surviving fugitive member of the Weather Underground.

For twenty-seven years, since the moment my mom expelled him from their group at Mendocino, J.J. had remained underground. He bummed around Mexico for a while, crossed back into the States, then slipped across the northern border to Canada and finally settled in Vancouver, where he eked out a meager living dealing drugs and working odd landscaping jobs. Over the years, J.J. fell in love, raised a family, became a heroin addict, kicked the habit, and repeatedly fell back off the wagon.

"Life is admittedly lonely and sad," he wrote in an unsent letter to his old friend Mark Rudd. "But you can't blame that on being a political fugitive. Life was already lonely and sad before we got involved in politics."

Almost nobody in J.J.'s life knew about his radical past. But when he died, his family discovered stacks of newspapers in his basement—clippings he had saved, following the stories of his former friends in the underground: when they had turned themselves in, where they'd done time, what they had done with the rest of their lives.

His family had his ashes spread over Che Guevara's grave in Cuba, and put up a plaque nearby thanking Castro's government "for the honor and respect" shown to J.J. in allowing him such proximity to his revolutionary idol. "He wanted to live like Che," the plaque read. "Let him rest with Che."

J.J.'s death, just a few years before the close of the twentieth century, marked a terminal milestone: everyone from the original Weather Underground Organization had now surfaced, been sent to prison, or died.

* * *

Kathy Boudin spent decades in prison. At first, she focused on activist work—trying to find new meaning and political purpose in life, even though she was locked away from her comrades and the rest of the world. She created an AIDS awareness initiative and a college education program that both became national models for other women's prisons.

But then, with some distance, Kathy started to think more and more about the more intimate consequences of her crime. "I had a longtime childhood friend," she told me, "and she came and she said to me, 'You know, Kathy, you always have some cause. You care about the Vietnamese, and you care about Black people, but you know, you've created victims. You yourself are responsible for that. Why don't you focus on that, and focus on them?'"

Kathy asked her lawyers to bring her news articles about the Brink's robbery. It was painful to revisit her crime years later, but she says it ultimately gave her a wider perspective on what she had done, the deadly fallout from her actions, and her own moral culpability. "I read the papers," she told me. "About the families that had suffered, and they became real

people to me.” Kathy spent a lot of her time thinking about these people—the innocent victims, and the wider circle of loved ones impacted by her violent crime. She wrote many letters of apology, which were placed in a file by the New York State Department of Corrections, available to the victims’ families, though Kathy never knew whether anyone read those letters or not.

“How do you possibly apologize,” she asked rhetorically, “for being part of something in which people’s husbands were killed, and *fathers* were killed? I remember spending hours and hours and hours trying to strip away the buts and the this and the that, and get to the feelings of, you know, what that really meant.”

Finally, after twenty-three years in prison, Kathy Boudin was granted parole. Her plea deal all those years earlier, and her efforts inside to make amends and reinvent herself, had given her a second chance. Kathy was thirty-eight when she was arrested; by the time she got out of prison she had turned sixty, and her baby son Chesa was heading off to graduate school.

Chesa with his parents on a rare joint visit in 1982, before they were sent to separate prisons. Chesa with his parents on another joint visit after Kathy’s release, more than twenty years later.

In the intervening years, my brother Chesa had turned his life around. He outgrew his seizures and learned to control his temper; he visited his parents in prison almost every weekend and found a way to forgive them for abandoning him. Over the years, he became as close to me and Malik as

any biological sibling. We grew up together. We went to the same schools and summer camps. Chesa became one of my closest friends.

He also became a straight-A student, won a Rhodes Scholarship, and went off to Yale and Yale Law School. After he graduated, he turned down all the offers from big corporate firms and joined the office of the San Francisco Public Defender, arguing on behalf of criminal defendants, often with their own kids sitting in the front row of the courtroom watching the trial. Which seems appropriate, somehow, for a kid whose early life was defined by his parents' crime.

"I remember him just overachieving academically and passing me by," my brother Malik says now, laughing. "People would ask me, 'Didn't it bother you that he was better at school than you?' But it didn't bother me at all. We were just different people. Once you saw him flip the switch, it made sense. I was thinking he was going to be running for president one day."

Chesa did run for office. In 2020, he was elected San Francisco's district attorney, part of a wave of progressive prosecutors swept into office in the wake of George Floyd's murder. But he was recalled a year later, part of the backlash to that moment of racial reckoning, and now runs a legal clinic at UC Berkeley, still fighting to reform the criminal justice system and raising two young children of his own.

When she got out of prison, Kathy tried to reinvent herself one final time. She found a job at Columbia University, in the School of Social Work. And in a weird coincidence, I happened to be a grad student at Columbia at the same time. We lived just a few blocks from each other. And then, a year after Kathy's release, Rachel and I had our first child—our daughter Dalin.

"Suddenly I was babysitting for her," Kathy remembered. "And I think that those years were really wonderful years because I was actually playing a role in your family."

For us, Kathy was a godsend. Rachel and I were both young writers, writing, teaching, and trying to figure out childcare in New York City. And Kathy called us up every Sunday to ask, "When can I help this week? What do you guys need?"

Kathy Boudin with my daughter Dalin, Columbia University campus, 2006.

Dalin adored Kathy, who could sit for hours on the living room floor or on the campus quad, staring at a toy or book or bug or blade of grass. She had infinite patience for our kid—and she quickly became our most reliable caregiver, like an auntie or third grandma, though we had to tell our friends, when we were out to dinner or a play, that we had to be home before 10 p.m. because our babysitter had a curfew—she was out on parole for felony murder. It might have been funny if it wasn't so deeply sad. When Kathy started babysitting for us, Dalin was fourteen months old—the exact age Chesa was when Kathy left him with his sitter and never came home.

"I would look at Dalin, that age," Kathy told me, "just trying to imagine, how could I have done that?"

* * *

That second chance Kathy got—that final shot at reinvention and rehabilitation—wasn't available to everyone. For people in the Black Liberation Army, especially, it was often difficult or impossible to start over. Black militants found no forgiveness or leniency from the criminal justice system; many of them have now been locked up for decades. Most are dead.

In fact, one of the formal challenges of writing this book was that so few Black leaders survived the decades-long revolutionary struggle that defined my family story and my parents' radical lives. The most prominent members of the Black resistance, my parents' first heroes and inspirations, were driven into exile, or killed by police and white vigilantes, or died in prison. So in telling the history of the Weather Underground, the parallel story of the Black struggle has to be related in chapters—Medgar Evers, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Hampton, Eldridge Cleaver, Assata Shakur, each figure succeeding the last, picking up the struggle after their predecessor fell.

Assata Shakur with her daughter, Kakuya, in Cuba, on a rare family visit.

Assata Shakur remained for years the last prominent member of the BLA still living underground. After her escape from prison she surfaced in Cuba, where she was granted political asylum. For years, she was able to move around relatively openly in Havana. She gave interviews, wrote her autobiography, and even participated in international talks and conferences. But then, in 2013, egged on by pressure campaigns from police unions, the FBI put Assata on their list of Most Wanted Terrorists. In 2017, Donald Trump gave a speech demanding the Cuban government extradite "the cop-killer JoAnne Chesimard" and offered a two-million-dollar reward for her capture.

Assata had to drop out of sight again, to submerge back into the underground. She died on September 25, 2025, just as I was finishing this book. She was seventy-eight years old. Her daughter, Kakuya, hadn't seen her mother for decades.

“I think it was probably twenty-two years ago,” Kakuya told me when I asked about her last connection to her mom. “I think about that a lot, that she remembered me as a fifteen-year-old. Like, wow, my mother really doesn’t know who I am now as a woman. She doesn’t know my children. I think a long time ago I came to the conclusion that they would never be able to meet their grandmother . . . There’s just this deep feeling of loss, you know?”

Like the rest of us, our fellow children of the underground, Kakuya has had a long time to think about her mother’s priorities—where she stacked up in the hierarchy of her mom’s values. Where she fit into her family’s purpose.

“I always knew that struggle was more important,” she told me. “Growing older, I began to understand the political struggle that my mother was so passionate about. My mother’s always been one to move to a different beat. One of those people who are a little bit ahead of their time. A little bit awkward, a little bit different. She questioned things and felt injustice very deeply within her. Almost like air, you know? Like reaching a point where you need to struggle because you can’t live with yourself if you don’t? At so many different points in our history, it’s like we had no choice but to struggle, to resist. And unfortunately, loss was a part of that. But even having a family is a kind of resistance, right? There is hope in having children.”

* * *

There is hope in having children. In 2007, Rachel and I had our second daughter. In a reluctant nod to her hippie ancestors, we let her older sister Dalin, who was then two and a half, name her. When Dalin asked, “How do I decide?” we asked her, “What are things you like?” After we rejected her first two choices (hummus and pizza), she settled on Light. We liked it. It suited our new baby girl, who was bright and sunny and cheerful.

Bill and Bernardine, like Kathy, became doting grandparents, hosting their granddaughters for a sleepover every Saturday night, taking them on field trips to museums and to the park.

And then, in 2008, my parents endured one last national surge of notoriety. At the height of the presidential primary campaign, Hillary Clinton criticized Barack Obama during a debate over his connection to my

father—the fact that Obama had held one of his early fundraisers in our Chicago living room, and he and my dad had served on the board of a nonprofit together. And then, once Barack won the primary, Sarah Palin got in on the act, claiming that he "is a person who sees America as imperfect enough to pal around with terrorists who targeted their own country."

For a while, Bill became one of Fox News's favorite bogeymen, trotted out, along with Obama's fiery pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, to prove that he was violent, threatening, and somehow vaguely un-American. David Axelrod, who managed Obama's presidential campaign at the time, told me that Barack saw it coming. "He understood what his relationship was with Bill and Bernardine," Axelrod told me. "Barack was friendly with them. We weren't going to run away from that. They wanted to turn him into a scary, radical Black man. And so Bernardine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, famous names from the radical past, were resurfaced for that purpose."

It was stressful, being in the middle of another media storm. But after Obama won the election, the coverage mostly died away; right-wing politicians and propagandists were interested in the story only so far as it could be used as a dog whistle in the political campaign, and the liberal left had no interest in debating the merits or controversies of the Weather Underground or the Black Liberation Army.

For the most part, life in our family finally went back to normal. Rachel and I focused on our parenting, on becoming teachers and professors ourselves, on building our careers as writers. But for some reason, I never wrote my own family story. Some of my plays and short stories circled around big political issues, or seemed, in retrospect, concerned with questions of how to balance emotional relationships with larger ideological commitments, but I never wrote about the Sixties, or the Weather Underground, or my parents' strange place in the history of this country. Maybe it all still felt too close, or too difficult, to make sense of it yet. Or maybe it felt too much like a burden—and as a still relatively young person myself, I didn't want the responsibility of explaining, or justifying, my parents' actions.

But then, in 2020, at the height of the Covid pandemic, I started to worry that maybe I'd waited too long. That my own parents' story—my inheritance—might be lost before I even had a chance to reckon with it.

My mother was about to turn eighty. Our adopted grandma Kathy Boudin was battling the stage 4 cancer that would eventually kill her. We

were all suddenly separated, facing what felt like a precarious, dangerous future. And it seemed as if this might be my last chance to ask my family some hard questions. To try to make sense of my legacy.

At the same time, it felt like the country was falling apart. When white supremacists marched openly in Charlottesville and George Floyd was murdered by police; when soldiers cleared Lafayette Square for an authoritarian photo op, I couldn't shake the feeling that my family history was maybe not so much repeating itself as circling up ahead of us, like a guerrilla army getting ready for an ambush.

I marched with my parents once more in the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, against white supremacists in Charlottesville and police violence in Ferguson. I still felt uncomfortable being part of a protest or a crowd, but my parents seemed optimistic, even ecstatic, to see a new radical struggle for racial justice emerge, another wave of potentially revolutionary change.

"You're lucky if you have one peak," Bill told me during one protest. "We lived through one peak, and this is a second one. I'm absolutely certain of it."

But these peaks and waves of history worried me—as a kid, and also more recently: the idea that history repeats itself, that revolutionary change just brings us back around to where we began, that the arc of history bends toward progress only for a little while and then keeps bending, further and further, until it becomes more like a circle or a loop. After all, if nothing ever truly changes, what's the point of fighting at all?

On the other hand, in moments like this one, eras of reaction and fascism, it can be galvanizing and inspiring to imagine the turn of that wheel. That each historical movement provokes a resistance which springs up to fight it. That racism and war and authoritarianism are not eternal and will always inspire pushback. That history will not end precisely because there will always be injustice and inequality to resist—because someone can always fight to make the world better.

But my life had already branched off, and I had taken a different path from my parents. I had become a writer instead of a revolutionary, which seems inevitable, in hindsight, as life paths often do. Not that my parents ever discouraged my choice; they never once hinted that they would have preferred for me to follow in their footsteps, to become an organizer or an activist, let alone a radical or a fugitive. My father had long wanted to be a writer himself, dating all the way back to his war novelist aspirations in the

Merchant Marine. He has written many books on teaching, and two memoirs. And my mom has always been a literary person, a voracious reader who read aloud to me and took me to see plays throughout my childhood. So, when I went to grad school to become a playwright, it felt less like a rebellion than a homecoming.

It would have been odd, anyway, to embrace the most conspicuous part of my parents' legacy—to pick up the revolution as if I were taking over the family business. Becoming a writer felt like a natural way to transform my inheritance, and to create my own legacy.

I asked my brother Malik, recently, if he ever felt pressure to be more like our radical parents. We joke sometimes about how our adopted brother Chesa is the only one of us who became a full-time activist, became the son Bill and Bernardine deserved, even if he doesn't share their DNA.

Malik laughed and shook his head. "No, I don't think I did feel pressure," he said. "I think I would have wilted under it, honestly. I don't remember feeling a need to be political or change the world. But I do feel like I made conscious decisions about how to live my life in a way that was meaningful."

For Malik, that meant becoming a sixth-grade schoolteacher at a bilingual public school in Oakland, teaching math and science to teenagers for more than twenty years and being a father to three kids.

"I reflect on the fact that my life is incredibly similar to Bill's," he told me. "As a father and a teacher. I reflect on that all the time. It's a difficult thing to express, as they get older. When you realize how much you owe your parents, how much you're like them. I talk to Bill all the time, but it's hard to put that shit into words, you know? Being like, 'Dude, I modeled my whole game after you.'"

This wasn't necessarily the legacy my parents meant to leave—that I would become a writer and Malik a teacher. I think, like Che, they at least hoped their children would grow up to be good revolutionaries. But this is another funny thing about legacy, something that only became clear to me while writing this book: all of us who are parents might think we know the lessons we want to pass on to our kids. There may be values we hold sacrosanct, traditions and beliefs we hope to pass on as part of their birthright. But ultimately, our children will decide for themselves what to make of their legacy. They'll look back, as adults, on their own complicated, messy childhoods, with the benefit of hindsight and their own

hard-earned values; we hope they'll note our good intentions, but we know they'll also see our flaws and contradictions; they'll find the meaning we tried to make of our own lives, but they'll recognize, inevitably, that purpose as inadequate for them—for their moment, and their hopes and dreams for the future. And they'll have to decide for themselves what parts of us to keep. And what to transform.

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Epilogue

Memories of a Revolution

(Chicago, 2020–25)

You can never make that crossing that she made, for such Great Voyages in this world do not anymore exist. But every day of your lives, the miles—that voyage from that place to this one—you cross. Every day.

—Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz, from *Angels in America*, by Tony Kushner

My mother.

In 2022, just as I started the interviews for this book, my mother started forgetting things.

She would misplace small objects: hair clips or mascara or pens. She would hunt for the right word, just out of reach, until she gave up with an irritated shake of her head. “Goddammit!” she would scold herself. And then, embarrassed, “Sorry. I just, you know, there’s—I just have these flickers of memory. Flickers.”

An hour after one of the first interviews we did for this book, she sent me a text making fun of her small lapses that day. “Great to see you!” she wrote. “Testing my unpredictable memory & lack thereof.”

We both treated it as a joke, for a while—a minor irritation. But then she started misplacing more essential objects: keys, glasses, phone. She had trouble keeping up with her daily routine, mixing up her calendar, showing up late for appointments. This was more than irritating for her; it made it difficult to keep up with her busy schedule, the meetings for the many social justice boards she sat on, and the work she did for her Children and Family Justice Center.

She flew to Atlanta for an event at the Equal Justice Initiative, led by her old friend the civil rights pioneer Bryan Stevenson. The event went well, but my mother found the airport bewildering. She’d been taking these weekly work trips for decades, but now everything seemed to be moving too fast. The signs and blinking screens in the terminal were overwhelming. She felt disoriented, lost.

Finally, my father, my brothers, and I convinced her to go to the hospital for an evaluation. She sat through a battery of tests and was diagnosed, like her mother Dorothy before her, with presumptive Alzheimer’s disease. The doctors told her she would slowly, inevitably, lose her memory, and then her mind.

My mother faced it bravely, as she does everything. She listened to the diagnosis with a calm expression, sitting on the hospital cot, straight-shouldered, glancing at us to see how we were taking things. Her eyes, which had always been dark and intense, were now a lighter shade of green, with a slight liquid tremor in each iris—the only movement in her face, which otherwise looked set in bronze. When the doctors were done with the explanation, she nodded once that she understood, thanked them for their time, and we all went home.

She didn’t want pity, or consolation. Refusing to hide from the truth or to be ashamed of her disease, that month she wrote a public letter to her friends and colleagues—the file name for the drafts she showed me “So Long.doc”:

Dear Sisters and Brothers, Family of Struggle,
I’ve been diagnosed with dementia, on the road to Alzheimer’s Disease. Perhaps you are thinking “Duh, that’s been obvious for a

while . . .”

I’m fortunate to have a beloved lifelong partner, our loving and supportive three sons and their remarkably brilliant partners, six grandchildren who fill us with joy, and you all, my chosen family.

I’m stepping back or resigning from the boards of the organizations I cherish. They are doing the critical work of fighting for justice and peace, and meeting the urgent needs of people everywhere. Today’s youth have taught and inspired me forward.

No reply is necessary.

With love, solidarity, and in struggle.

Bernardine

And with that, she stepped away from her public life and receded from the world.

Slowly, even the minutiae of the everyday started to fade. Eventually, my mom couldn’t keep track of her phone or carry a wallet. She couldn’t remember if she’d locked the door or turned off the stove. Her daily routine became difficult, then impossible, and my dad had to step in to manage their calendar, their social lives, and their shared home.

Like Barney before him, Bill became his partner’s primary caregiver, and Bernardine, who had always been fiercely, uncompromisingly independent, even with her partner and children, came to rely on his loyalty, his devotion, and his love.

But in our deeper conversations, she remained freethinking and focused as always—her memories, opinions, and regrets about the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s stayed sharp and vivid long after her recent memories were gone. We had intense discussions and arguments—about history and politics, children and family—and she remained her belligerent, opinionated self throughout, disagreeing with me or with Bill more often than not, cutting through a weak argument or a liberal ambivalence with her characteristic radical certainty. In fact, some of our most illuminating conversations, our deepest connections over the past years, were during interviews for this book.

But then, even our ancient history started to fade.

We’d flip through photo albums together, and my mom would stare for a long time at the faces in the pictures, trying to recognize old friends and

comrades. I had to remind her sometimes about key moments in her own life: her first arrest, the Days of Rage, my birth.

"I don't remember that." She would shake her head. "I'm sorry. I'm foggy about that."

Another time: "I'm too muddled right now in different time periods. In different places, and I can't think about it."

Once, in the middle of a conversation, she cut herself off abruptly. "Why did I say that?" she wondered aloud. "I'm jumping around time here."

My mother had become disoriented, lost in competing chronologies. When we talked about her history, our conversations started to become elliptical and spiraling, looping without clear signposts across eras and decades, and coming back around again.

"This is my last interview," she told me a year ago. "So, I'm not scared. It is funny to look back now and think about forty years ago . . . But you know, I'm very happy with my life. Bill as a partner, and you three guys and your families. And the struggle, having new peaks and valleys and taking things much farther along."

Finally I stopped asking her about her past; it had become too confusing and frustrating, and it seemed to make her unhappy. But by then, the present was also becoming unreliable. My mom rarely knew what day it was, or what she had done that morning. I had to prompt her to tell me about things I already knew: where she had gone in the morning, what she had eaten, what friends she had seen. It was painful to feel like I was losing our relationship, losing her, just as I finally tried to see her, fully, for the first time.

It took me a while to realize—as both the past and the present became more difficult, as we lost our shared connection to that earlier time—what we still had in common was the future.

I asked my mom recently if there was anything she was still looking forward to, and she responded right away, eagerly, with a bright smile. "I want to see my grandkids graduate," she told me. "I want to see what they do with their lives. I want to see what they do with the world."

* * *

In 2023, our daughter Dalin went off to college at Parsons School of Design in New York; she had decided to become an artist. As one of her first assignments, she was asked to create a virtual memorial to a place in New York, and she chose to make a piece about Diana and Terry and Teddy—the townhouse explosion sixty-three years earlier, the site just two blocks away from her college classroom.

A few of her classmates were baffled and scandalized by her attempt. Why, they wondered, would you want to memorialize terrorists? Especially long-forgotten ones from more than half a century ago? What was the point of making a memorial to people who had once tried, but failed, to change the world?

Dalin struggled with the question. What did she think about her grandparents' legacy? What did she want to memorialize, or understand, of her own radical family history?

Meanwhile, our younger daughter, Light, at seventeen, became the editor-in-chief of her high school paper. She recently published an opinion piece on Luigi Mangione and America's broken healthcare system, in which she wrestled with the moral repercussions of political violence, and got hate mail and even calls for her expulsion. In between fear and defiance, she told me and Rachel, "I guess I come by it honestly, at least."

It was hard not to notice that both our daughters, like me and my brothers before them, were struggling to make sense of their radical legacy —to find work, and purpose, that somehow responds to the injustice in the world while also taking into account the perils and pitfalls of their grandparents' violent revolutionary project.

This is, after all, not a family history that lends itself to easy slogans or simple moral lessons. All of us kids who grew up in the underground know intimately the costs and tragedies of that struggle. Our parents—our childhood heroes—turned out to be flawed human beings, never quite living up to their own revolutionary ideals, and we all have memories of loss and abandonment and trauma. But if all we inherit is their failure and tragedy, we lose the value of their hope and idealism. Their youthful courage and fierce commitment to a cause. And the motive force of their wild and radical imaginations.

I think what we inherit, like all people, is a choice, and a responsibility: to take what we can from our parents and our grandparents and the generations that came before, to understand them as well as we can, and

then to try to transform what was passed down to us in order to make a better future for ourselves and our children and our children's children.

Which makes me think of my mom again, as a young girl, and all the unlikely ingredients that went into making her strange, unpredictable, revolutionary story: her father Barney's protean American immigrant journey; her adolescent sense of herself as an outsider—a Jew and a woman in a culture hostile to both; the example of courage and self-sacrifice set by Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, by Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Hampton; the rage inspired by their untimely deaths; the inspiration of freedom fighters around the world and the Black resistance movement here in the United States.

Bernardine *created* her own inheritance. She *chose* to follow in the footsteps of people other than her parents, people different from the models offered up to her by her country and her culture. As a girl and a young woman, she looked around at the world being prepared for her and decided, rather than passively accept the future, she would try to transform it.

She's not alone. Every generation is born into a world desperately in need of transformation, and young people in every era have inherited a struggle—the fight to make things better—that stretches back long before any of them were born.

In every new age, young people will have to rise to meet a unique moment. Some, of course, will miss their chance or reject their responsibility. Others will lack the innate qualities or cultural context that turns idealists into revolutionaries. But in every generation, some will be picked up and carried along by history's wave. A few will find a way to ride it. To stand at its peak. And show us a new way forward.

Some will become activists. And some might not even consider themselves political at all. They may, like our daughters Dalin and Light, aspire to be artists and journalists, or musicians and poets, or social workers and teachers, and find their own ways to change the world.

They may not feel comfortable in a crowd or as a member of a movement. They may not have their grandparents' radical impulse to take to the streets or blow things up, to overthrow a system. They might not become outlaws or fugitives. But they're all still engaged in the same necessary, vital, and revitalizing work: to invent and reinvent themselves to match and move the spirit of their times; to imagine and reimagine a better future; and to grow up to be good revolutionaries.

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Acknowledgments

Go on, get out. Last words are for fools who haven't said enough.
—Karl Marx (last words, spoken to his servant), 1883

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Notes

Unsourced quotes come from interviews conducted by the author with:

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Yeshi Neumann: February 18, 2025
Sekou Odinga: February 18, 2021
Bj Richards: January 15, 2021
Eleanor Stein: September 17, 2024
Cathy Wilkerson: October 16, 2020
Marie “Cookie” Woodford: December 3, 2024

Family documents and letters not otherwise sourced are in the author’s personal archive.

A Note on Interviews and Sources

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Prologue: Underground

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bomb shook the U.S. Army base in the Presidio: "Army Target at Coast Blasts," *New York Times*, July 28, 1970.
My mother went by: FBI Report, "Foreign Influence—Weather Underground Organization, Volume II," August 20, 1976.
"We live here in America!": *Underground*, directed by Emile de Antonio, Mary Lampson, and Haskell Wexler (1976). De Antonio, Lampson, and Wexler met with the fugitives in secret in 1975.

Part 1: **The Most Dangerous Woman in America**

But the neighborhood had been hollowed out: Elaine Lewinnek, *The Working Man's Reward: Chicago's Early Suburbs and the Roots of American Sprawl* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
Great Migration: See Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (Vintage, 2011).
"My father was a racist": "My father wanted to be white," Jennifer says, "wanted his kids to be white. [But] my father wasn't white. He was dark-skinned. Probably a trace of North African, Eastern Mediterranean, Sephardic, Jewish . . ."
"He beat everybody": Jacob's daughter Rae remembers, "He would spank me with something heavy and it would really hurt. I would keep my mouth shut and that would make him madder." Rae Sohr, interview with Jennifer Dohrn, January 21, 2008.
Barney's first and second marriages were "mixed": Lindsy Van Gelder, "Bernardine Dohrn Is Weighed in the Balance and Found Heavy," *Esquire*, April 1, 1971.
The Ohrnsteins would have their own two-story home: Van Gelder, "Bernardine Dohrn Is Weighed in the Balance."
ranked 15th in a class of 227: Tom Fitzpatrick, "Evolution of Bernardine . . . pep club to revolution," *Chicago Sun–Times*, October 16, 1970.
treasurer of the modern dance club: Larry Grathwohl as told to Frank Reagan, *Bringing Down America: An FBI Informer with the Weathermen* (Arlington House, 1976), 103.
"The most remarkable thing about Bernardine": Van Gelder, "Bernardine Dohrn Is Weighed in the Balance."
"She was a good scholar": Patricia Krizmis, "Bernardine Dohrn: Making of a Rebel," *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 1970.
"I dug her a lot . . . but you understand": Fitzpatrick, "Evolution of Bernardine."
surname legally changed: On September 10, 1958.
"Students gossiped": Krizmis, "Bernardine Dohrn."
"The lesson she seemed to extract": Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties* (Encounter, 2005), 72.
but college "girls": *M Book* (Miami University, 1959), 44.
Hyde Park: "Hyde Park," *The Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago Historical Society, 2005).
"urban renewal" and "slum clearance" projects: Peter Slevin, "Uncommon Ground," *Washington Post*, October 16, 2008.
Bernie Sanders . . . led a series of protests: The university agreed to form a commission to study the issue, but later reneged on its promise. See Sarah Zimmerman, "Bernie's Journey Home," *University of Chicago College Media*, April 12, 2016.
refusing to rent to Black students: Tim Murphy, "Here's What Bernie Sanders Actually Did in the Civil Rights Movement," *Mother Jones*, February 11, 2016.
folk music "happening": According to a later magazine profile, she quickly became a "Humphrey Bogart cultist and a music freak, from classical to Dylan." Van Gelder, "Bernardine Dohrn Is Weighed in the Balance."
Doc Films movie club: See, for example, "Culture Vulture," *Daily Maroon*, November 17, 1961, and February 23, 1962.
Enovid: Bernard Asbell, *The Pill: A Biography of the Drug that Changed the World* (Random House, 1995).
"nigger–communist invasion . . . hit-and-run group!": Don Whitehead, "Murder in Mississippi," *Reader's Digest*, September 1970, 194.
corpses of eight Black men: "Mississippi Freedom Summer Events: Lynching of Chaney, Schwerner & Goodman (June)," Civil Rights Movement Archive, https://www.crmvet.org.

Dean of Admissions: James Hormel, who decades later would be appointed by President Clinton as the country's first openly gay ambassador—a trailblazer in his own right.
law school was truly a man's world: Nationwide in 1964, only about 4% of law students were women. See Lawrence M. Friedman, *American Law in the 20th Century* (Yale University Press, 2002), 458.
"Only two or three . . . to get good things done": Van Gelder, "Bernardine Dohrn Is Weighed in the Balance."
"a full-scale assault": Donald Janson, "Drive in Chicago Begun by Dr. King," *New York Times*, January 8, 1966.
"I've been in many demonstrations": "1966 Housing March in Chicago Martin Luther King Jr.," posted March 28, 2011, by My Footage, YouTube.
"Both of us . . . one hundred percent revolutionary": Van Gelder, "Bernardine Dohrn Is Weighed in the Balance."
"First of all, there was her sex appeal": Patricia Lear, "Rebel Without a Pause," *Chicago Magazine*, May 1993.
"A stunningly attractive woman": Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 71–73.
"Would she win a beauty contest?": Bill Dyson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee for *Mother Country Radicals* podcast (Crooked Media, 2022), October 21, 2020.
"It's a completely sexist": Lear, "Rebel Without a Pause."
"Bernardine was incredible": Kit Bakke, interview with Stephanie Cohn for *Mother Country Radicals* podcast, October 16, 2020.
"Bernardine was the she-goddess": Lear, "Rebel Without a Pause."
"fused the two premium female images": Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Random House, 1993), 385–86.
"conspiracy stuff": Details of the conspiracies surrounding the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. can be found in "Assassination Conspiracy Trial," King Center.
"I consider myself": Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS: The Rise and Development of the Students for a Democratic Society* (Random House, 1973), 451.
"Key Activist . . . necessary coverage": FBI Airtel from FBI Director to SAC [Special Agent in Charge] LA, NY, and San Diego, "Investigation of the New Left (Key Activists)," June 18, 1968. Notably, the Bureau insisted this term should be appended to Bernardine's name "except on communications . . . which will be disseminated outside of the Bureau."
arrested nearly a dozen times: For disorderly conduct, possession of narcotics, grand theft auto, criminal trespass, aggravated battery, resisting arrest, and multiple counts of "mob action." FBI Report 56 360 H, obtained via FOIA request.

Part 2: **Kill Your Parents**

"Kill all the rich people": Jeremy Larner, "Moratorium: A View from the Inside," *Life*, November 28, 1969.
Eisenhower Republican: According to Bill, Eisenhower once tapped Tom to be Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, but Tom turned it down.
Chicago Committee to Fight Discrimination: Chicago Police Department, Red Squad Collection, box 16, file 1001-R, Chicago History Museum.
Lake Forest Academy: Bill's classmates included Oscar Mayer III, Igor Stravinsky IV, and his best friend Harry Korshak, son of famous Chicago mob lawyer Sidney Korshak, who represented Jimmy Hoffa and acted as the mob's legal fixer in Hollywood.
"We are people of this generation": Tom Hayden, "The Port Huron Statement" (Students for a Democratic Society, 1962).
Black students made up only 0.5 percent: Matthew Johnson, "Managing Racial Inclusion: The Origins and Early Implementation of Affirmative Action Admissions at the University of Michigan," *Journal of Policy History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 462–89.
an outsize percentage of the Black students: 25% of all Black students at the university at the time were athletes. Johnson, "Managing Racial Inclusion."
pizza place in Ann Arbor . . . knocked him to the ground: Bill Ayers, *Fugitive Days* (Beacon Press, 2001), 40.
a banner headline in the European edition: "U.S. Marines Arrive at Da Nang, South Vietnam," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 8, 1965.
"The first revolution": "Gil Scott-Heron on the Mental Origin of Political Revolution," posted February 25, 2017, by Kelly Gerling, YouTube.
"teach-ins": Alan Glenn, "The Times, They Were A-Changin'," *Michigan Alum Magazine*, Summer 2017.
Bill joined SDS: Ayers, *Fugitive Days*, 61.
"the immediate expulsion of students": Sale, *SDS*, 547.
SDS sit-in at the Selective Service Office: Glenn, "The Times, They Were A-Changin'."
Her great-grandfather William Boyce: Thomas Powers, *Diana: The Making of a Terrorist* (Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 11.
"I don't want you to give me an allowance": Powers, *Diana*, 63.
to help people on the other side of the world: This is also the golden rule; as my father's hero, John Brown, put it in a statement to the court before his execution, "The LAW OF GOD . . . teaches me to 'Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.' I endeavored to act up to that instruction."
The Black Panther: Surprisingly, the Black Panther comic book character predates the founding of the Black Panther Party, though both appeared in 1966.
indifference, neglect, and physical abuse: See Cathy Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman* (Seven Stories Press, 2007), 400.
"He felt like he had to prove himself": Cathy Wilkerson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee for *Mother Country Radicals* podcast, November 10, 2020.
set out to collect a volume: Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 173.
burning exam papers on the quad: Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 226.
"We're saying to people": Sale, *SDS*, 480.
Diana was often the lone voice of reason: "Diana was sober and pensive, with a gentility she never quite succeeded in obliterating." Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 76.
"I feel like a moral person": Powers, *Diana*, 100.
"fuck them up!": According to a police informant, Hayden told SDS members at the time, "we should have people organized who can fight the police, people who are willing to get arrested."

Sandy Smith, “The Chicago Police Riot,” *Life*, December 6, 1968, 37.
cops didn’t need the encouragement: See Frank Kusch, *Battleground Chicago: The Police and the 1968 Democratic National Convention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
“a significant number of Chicago Police units”: Smith, “The Chicago Police Riot.”
“Many Weatherman leaders”: Tom Hayden, “Justice in the Streets,” *Trial* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).
international antiwar conference: “That was a very big invitation,” Bernardine remembered. “To have a formal week-long meeting with delegations that would include the NLF and the North Vietnamese was kind of a big deal.” See Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 100.
doubled as a roller derby rink: Sale, *SDS*, 558.
Tape recorders and members of the “capitalist press”: FBI Domestic Intelligence Division, “Informative Note,” June 19, 1969.
Delegates were screened: FBI teletype, June 21, 1969.
hundreds of knives, blackjacks, and slingshots: Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (AK Press, 2005), 79.
a line of Black Panthers marched: SDS member turned right-wing neoconservative David Horowitz and his co-writer called them “a gang of ghetto thugs” and used this strange simile to describe their appearance at the convention: “The Panthers arrived early in the afternoon in their uniforms of black leather jackets and sunglasses, looking like some lost Nazi legion whose skin color had changed during their diaspora.” Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 12.
The details of the dispute are complicated: For more on the ideological infighting and left-wing factionalism inside the group, see Sale, *SDS*, 489.
members tended to avoid drugs, long hair: Mark Rudd, *Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen* (Harper, 2010).
“cultural aliens”: Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 79.
“‘audacity, audacity, and more audacity!’”: Prophetically for him, though J.J. may not have known it at the time, the line originates not with Che Guevara (it has also been attributed to Frederick the Great, Napoleon, and George S. Patton) but with Georges Danton, the French intellectual and revolutionary who also coined the phrase “the revolution eats its children.” Georges Jacques Danton, “De l’audace, Encore de l’audace, Toujours de l’audace,” speech at the Assemblée Nationale, September 2, 1792.
“tall and rangy”: Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 70.
“White youth must choose sides now”: Sale, *SDS*, 566.
charismatic young leader, Fred Hampton: In spite of his youth, Hampton had quickly climbed the ranks of the BPP; in 1968, he was named chairman of the Illinois chapter and deputy chairman of the national party, and was next in line to be chief of staff to the party’s Central Committee. See Rod Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century* (NYU Press, 2000), 216.
Rainbow Coalition of activist groups: The coalition also included the Young Patriots, the Young Lords, Rising Up Angry, the Brown Berets, the American Indian Movement, and the Red Guard Party. See Martha M. Arguello, “We Joined Others Who Were Poor: The Young Lords, the Black Freedom Struggle, and the ‘Original’ Rainbow Coalition,” *Journal of African American Studies* 23 (November 2019): 435–54.
“Some people don’t understand”: “The Murder of Fred Hampton – Full Doc.,” by the Film Group, 1971, posted May 15, 2025, by thepostarchive, YouTube. Original in the Chicago Film Archives.
“The best thing that we can be doing”: Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Prisoner,” *New Yorker*, July 8, 2001.
“embryonic alliance”: FBI memo, May 19, 1969, quoted in Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI’s Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United*

States (South End Press, 2001), 210.
"were alienated," "plant the idea that the SDS": FBI memo, May 21, 1969, quoted in Churchill and Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers*, 211.
"It may also be possible": FBI memo from FBI Director to SAC Chicago, "COINTELPRO – New Left," October 23, 1968.
The Bureau had deployed these tactics before: Daniel S. Chard, "Nixon's War on Terrorism: The FBI, Leftist Guerrillas, and the Origins of Watergate," PhD dissertation, UMass Amherst, 2016, 97.
"cartoons designed to defame": Chard, "Nixon's War on Terrorism."
As the FBI hoped . . . blamed these insults: David Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here: The New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence* (University of California Press, 2004), 92.
"bourgeois," and "reactionary": Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 79.
"If the Progressive Labor Party": "Black Panther Statement," read to the National Convention, reprinted in *SDS: New Left Notes* 4, no. 23 (June 25, 1969): 2.
Rufus "Chaka" Walls: The first of the Panthers, that is. Walls had been preceded to the podium by members of the Puerto Rican Young Lords and the Chicano Brown Berets. See Sale, *SDS*, 566–67.
"armchair Marxists": Some argue that it was strategy on the part of Bernardine's RYM contingent to have Walls attack PL on their behalf. See Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here*, 60.
"You sisters *do have*": He was likely quoting an infamous joke made by civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael, that the "only position for women in SNCC is prone." See Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the Civil Rights Movement* (William Morrow, 1987), 568–69.
more than half of Black Panther Party members: Linda Lumsden, "Good Mothers With Guns: Framing Black Womanhood in the Black Panthers, 1968–1980," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 900–22.
"We are going to have to decide!": Details of the scene inside and outside the Coliseum come from Sale, *SDS*, 570–72.
Hundreds of people . . . followed Bernardine: Different sources have different numbers, but roughly half to two-thirds of the audience followed Bernardine out of the Coliseum that day.
"Anyone active in SDS now": FBI memo from Mr. W. C. Sullivan to C. D. Brennan, "Internal Security – Students for a Democratic Society," July 10, 1969.
"the single greatest mistake": Rudd, *Underground*, 190–91.

Part 3: **Bring the War Home**

"Dear Zayd": Bernardine Dohrn, letter to Zayd Dohrn, July 12, 1982.
"You really surprised me": Bernardine Dohrn, letter to Zayd Dohrn, July 26, 1982.
"We are not nice": Cha Cha Jiménez, "To My People, The Poor, The Youth, The Oppressed," *SDS: New Left Notes* 4, no. 18 (March 25, 1969): 4.
boarded a plane for Mexico City: Bernardine brought along not only some of her fellow Weathermen, but also her comrades from Fred Hampton's Rainbow Coalition in Chicago: members of the Puerto Rican paramilitary independence group Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN) and the Latino activist street gang the Young Lords.
Vietnamese National Liberation Front: A later Senate report noted that "The Vietnamese delegations were composed of hand-picked cadres, experienced in mass organization and guerrilla warfare." "The Weather Underground: Report of the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, 94th Cong., 1st Sess." (U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1975), 141. There were rumors that Angela Davis was also in Havana during Bernardine's visit, but whether they met there is not known. See Georgie Anne Geyer and Keyes Beech, "Cuba: School for U.S. Radicals," part 1, *Chicago Daily News*, October 12, 1970.
"Bernardine Dohrn . . . appears to be responsible": FBI memo from SAC San Francisco to FBI Director, "Revolutionary Union," August 29, 1969.
"[Her Cuba trip] clearly shows": FBI memo from Mr. W. C. Sullivan to C. D. Brennan, "Internal Security – Students for a Democratic Society," July 25, 1969.
"Bernardine Dohrn, mini-skirted Weatherwoman": Geyer and Beech, "Cuba: School for U.S. Radicals," Part 1.
"It was horrible": Teishan Aaron Latner, *Irresistible Revolution: Cuba and American Radicalism, 1968–1992*, PhD dissertation, University of California–Irvine, 2013, 44.
white sand beaches of Jibacoa: Geyer and Beech, "Classes on Beach for U.S. Radicals," part 2 of "Cuba: School for U.S. Radicals," *Chicago Daily News*, October 13, 1970.
"Aim of revolution": See "The Weather Underground: Senate Report," 143–47.
"understand true nature of war": David Barber, "Chapter 4: The New Left Starts to Disintegrate," *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed* (University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 24.
"The war is entering": Huynh Va Ba, head of the Vietnamese delegation, quoted in Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 83.
overthrowing the U.S. government . . . possible: As Bill put it in an article that fall, "The Vietnamese are strong, the most heroic and the most incredible people in the world, and they've beaten U.S. imperialism. That lesson is very important for us because it teaches us . . . that the United States is not indestructible, not some kind of monolith that can never be changed, that history is not static, that the people can win." Bill Ayers, "A Strategy to Win," read at the Midwest National Action Conference in Cleveland, reprinted in *SDS: New Left Notes* 4, no. 29 (August 29, 1969).
"made me a full-time revolutionary": *Underground* (film). She was also echoing Black Panther founder Huey P. Newton, who reportedly said, "it was the experience of the Cuban people that taught [me] that guerrilla warfare was the correct tactic in the struggle." See "Black Panther Leaders Arrive in Cuba," *Granma*, August 25, 1968, 7.
"Self-criticism": "Without self-criticism," Stalin told his cadres, "our Party could not make any headway, could not disclose our ulcers, could not eliminate our shortcomings." Joseph Stalin, *Works: From Marx to Mao* (Foreign Language Publishing House, 1954), 2:32.
"Dust will accumulate": Mao Zedong, "On Coalition Government" (April 24, 1945) in *Selected Works* (Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 3:316–17. The Weathermen apparently stumbled across the

concept in William Hinton's romanticized depiction of life in a Chinese village commune, *Fanshen*. "Required reading in all collectives," according to Mark Rudd in *Underground*, 161.
Here's how it worked: Rudd, *Underground*, 161.
cult initiation: "I do believe it was a cult," says Weatherwoman Lisa Meisel. "It had leadership, tightly controlled. And then it had dogma and instructions. I basically did what I was told. I lost my identity. I was young, and I had no experience. I was completely consumed by the culture." Interestingly, undercover FBI informant Larry Grathwohl was himself subject to a criticism/self-criticism session—what he called an "acid test"—in one of the Weather collectives. See Grathwohl, *Bringing Down America*, 121–23.
"You, who shall emerge": "To Posterity," in Bertolt Brecht, *Selected Poems*, trans. H.R. Hays (Grove Press, 1947), 175.
"We had unwittingly reproduced": Rudd, *Underground*, 162–63.
bourgeois norms of women as property: "If women are made into objects, the object-relationships between men and women make human communication and community impossible for both," wrote Bernardine and Naomi Jaffe in *New Left Notes*. "If women are defined by their sexual roles . . . they are only a paradigm case of the reified role structures that stifle the creative spontaneity of men and women alike." Bernardine Dohrn and Naomi Jaffe, "The Look Is You," *SDS: New Left Notes* 3, no. 10 (March 18, 1968), 5.
Manuel Ascunce: "The Weather Underground: Senate Report," 59. The boat's name was symbolically appropriate for this group of student activists; Manuel Ascunce was a martyr of the Cuban Revolution, a sixteen-year-old murdered by government-backed militias for teaching Cuban peasants to read. See Pedro Etcheverry Vázquez, "Manuel Ascunce: paradigma del magisterio cubano," *Granma*, November 25, 2016.
Cuban embassies in New York and Ottawa: Nicholas M. Horrock, "F.B.I. Asserts Cuba Aided Weatherman," *New York Times*, October 9, 1977; Geyer and Beech, "Cuba UN Mission Fuels Radicals," part 3 of "Cuba: School for U.S. Radicals," *Chicago Daily News*, October 14, 1970; and Bob Wiedrich, "Cuba's Role in the Underground," *Chicago Tribune*, November 20, 1981.
Larry Grathwohl . . . offered up "reports": Grathwohl, *Bringing Down America*, 170–72.
no real evidence of foreign backing of the Weathermen: Arthur M. Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising: How the Weather Underground Beat the FBI and Lost the Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2016), 164–65; CIA Situation Information Report, June 18, 1970.
the claim of foreign espionage: In fact, the Church report, citing the FBI's search for "foreign connections" in its campaign against Martin Luther King Jr., concluded that the government's "concern for 'foreign subversion' was distorted so far beyond reasonable definition that the term 'subversion' should be abandoned completely. Even with the qualifier 'foreign,' the concept is so elastic as to be susceptible to future misuse." "Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities," 94th Cong., 2d sess., 1976, 176.
"I asked Bernardine about right-wing charges": Tom Hayden, *Listen Yankee!* (Seven Stories Press, 2015), 113–14.
multiple federal investigations: By the FBI, CIA, and the State Department. See FBI report, "Foreign Influence – Weather Underground Organization," August 20, 1976, and CIA report, "Foreign Communist Support of United States Revolutionary Protest Movements," June 30, 1969; also see Geyer and Beech, "Cuba: School for U.S. Radicals."
"In times of revolution": Eldridge Cleaver, "On Weatherman," *Berkeley Tribe*, November 7, 1969.
"Just think . . . a vanguard!": Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 89.
Others had stuffed their pockets: Ayers, *Fugitive Days*, 167.
"We refuse to be 'good Germans!'": Powers, *Diana*, 155.
"Bring the War Home": "'Bring the War Home' is a slogan not just for the national action but for here on in," Bill and Terry wrote that summer. "Our aim is to create another front against imperialism

in the white mother country itself." Motor City SDS, "Break On Through to the Other Side," *SDS: New Left Notes* 4, no. 29 (August 29, 1969), 4–5.
illegal surveillance, arrests, and even police violence: Kathy Boudin, Terry Robbins, and Bernardine Dohrn, "Bringing the War Back Home: Less Talk, More National Action," *SDS: New Left Notes* 4, no. 28 (August 23, 1969).
"In our first discussions with the Panthers": Boudin, Robbins, and Dohrn, "Bringing the War Back Home."
"Kick ass": "Bring the War Home," *SDS: New Left Notes* 4, no. 29 (August 29, 1969, Vietnam Supplement), 3.
"major thrust": Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here*, 64.
two thousand full-time FBI agents: Sale, *SDS*, 543–44.
Chicago police "Red Squad": "Report on SDS: February 17, 1970," Chicago Police Department, Red Squad Collection, box 168, file 1001-P, Chicago History Museum.
"crazies" and "mad dogs": "Organizational Map of SDS," Chicago Police Department, Red Squad Collection, box 313, no. 11, Chicago History Museum.
"vials, believed to be dangerous drugs": FBI teletype, from Chicago to FBI Director, August 26, 1969. A record of the search can be found at the Chicago Police Department, Red Squad Collection, box 168, file 1001-L, Chicago History Museum.
"other interested agencies": FBI teletype from Chicago to FBI Director, August 26, 1969.
the judge ruled the search: On September 9, 1969, Judge Kenneth R. Wendt of Narcotics Court, Chicago, dismissed the charges. See "The Weather Underground: Senate Report," 59–60.
"You can jail revolutionaries": See "Round Up," *SDS: New Left Notes* 4, no. 29 (August 29, 1969): 8.
disorderly conduct, Chicago 8, "mob action": "The Weather Underground: Senate Report," 59–60. Eight activists, including Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and Bobby Seale, were charged with conspiracy for planning the protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention.
Red Squad cops burst into the Chicago collective: Bryan Burrough, *Days of Rage: America's Radical Underground, the FBI, and the Forgotten Age of Revolutionary Violence* (Penguin, 2015), 72. "I could smell the liquor on [the officer's] breath," Roth later remembered. "And then they pulled me up and it was all a big joke." Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 106.
"saw himself in dreams": Ayers, *Fugitive Days*, 106.
The Blasters' Handbook: DuPont Explosives Department Sales, *The Blasters' Handbook: A Manual Describing Explosives and Practical Methods of Use*, 15th edition (E.I. Du Pont De Nemours and Co., 1969).
On October 6, he and three friends: Jeff Huebner, "Haymarket Revisited," *Chicago Reader*, December 9, 1993.
"an act of disrespect," "not harmless kids", "kill or be killed,": Tom Thomas, "The Second Battle of Chicago," in Harold Jacobs, ed., *Weatherman* (Ramparts Press, 1969).
"There is a war going on": Thomas, "The Second Battle of Chicago."
a window shattered on the second floor of the Chicago Historical Society: "The Weather Underground: Senate Report, 15."
imitation of the street protests in the film *The Battle of Algiers*: Ayers, *Fugitive Days*, 170.
injuring more than half a dozen Weathermen: One student, John Van Veenendaal, was shot in the neck, which permanently paralyzed his left arm. See Thomas, "The Second Battle of Chicago," and Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 111.
But they didn't stop: "The Weathermen were now spearheading a senseless rampage through the streets of Chicago," according to "The Weather Underground: Senate Report," 15. "They stopped cars and beat the bewildered passengers, smashed windows and glass doors, and urinated on everything in sight." I haven't seen the urinating allegation elsewhere and I doubt it's true, but it captures the bewildered and disgusted attitude of law enforcement and government authorities.

“Windows were smashed!”: Shin’ya Ono, “You Do Need a Weatherman to Know Which Way the Wind Blows,” *Leviathan*, December 1969.
mobilized the state’s National Guard: “The fact that they have called out the National Guard is a victory,” argued one anonymous Weatherman. “For every soldier they bring in here, that’s fewer than can vamp on our brothers in Vietnam, our brothers in Latin America, in the ghetto . . . The more they oppress us, the more Weatherman wins.” Thomas, “The Second Battle of Chicago,” 11. For more on the National Guard’s mobilization, see “The Weather Underground: Senate Report,” 15–16.
more than seventy helmeted Weatherwomen: The Senate report called them “100 girls helmeted and padded like a women’s hockey team,” who responded to the police “by kicking, spitting, and biting.” “The Weather Underground: Senate Report,” 16.
She was arrested for the fourth time: FBI Record, 56 360 H, obtained via FOIA request; Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 111.
“alone in a languid pose”: Susan Stern, quoted in Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 89–90.
police arrested 250 protestors, shot six: Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 393.
Nearly everyone involved in the Days of Rage faced indictments: FBI memo from Mr. W. C. Sullivan to C. D. Brennan, “Students for a Democratic Society,” November 20, 1969.
“These people are running up and down”: Bill Dyson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee for *Mother Country Radicals* podcast, October 21, 2020.
“What right does anyone have”: Mayor Richard Daley interviewed by CBS News, October 9, 1969.
“We think it’s anarchistic”: Fred Hampton interviewed by ABC News, October 9, 1969.
“America reaps what she sows”: Hayden, “Justice in the Streets.”
Cuban state press covered the Days of Rage: See “Muerto un joven negro en acto de protesta en Chicago,” *Granma*, October 11, 1969.
the widow of National Liberation Front martyr Nguyen Van Troi: “Letter from Van Troi’s Widow to the Youth of the United States,” *Granma*, October 11, 1969. Troi was executed by the South Vietnamese after a failed attempt to assassinate visiting U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.
“Much of the criticism of the Weathermen”: Cleaver, “On Weatherman.”
The demonstrations that month were massive: Steven, “1990–1991: Resistance to the Gulf War,” Libcom.org, September 9, 2006.
“Nothing is more important than stopping fascism”: Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Lawrence Hill, 2011), 4.
Good Humor jingle: Tellingly, the jingle has racist roots—as a song called “Nigger Love A Watermelon Ha! Ha! Ha!” released in March 1916 by Columbia Records. See Theodore R. Johnson III, “Recall That Ice Cream Truck Song? We Have Unpleasant News For You,” *Code Switch: Word Watch*, NPR, May 11, 2014.
“40 to 50 children and teenagers”: *The People of the State of Illinois v. Fred Hampton*, 44 Ill. 2d 41, 253 N.E.2d 385 (Illinois 1969).
“They’re talking about giving me twenty years”: “The Murder of Fred Hampton – Full Doc.”
“coalition of militant black”: FBI Airtel from FBI Director to SAC, March 4, 1968.
“key militant,” “agitator index”: Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression*, 66. The Black Panther Party, by this point, was the primary focus of federal law enforcement. “Of the 295 documented actions taken by COINTELPRO alone to disrupt Black groups, 233—or 79 percent—were specifically directed toward destruction of the Party.” See David Hilliard and Donald Weise, eds., *Response of the Government to the Black Panther Party: The Huey Newton Reader* (Seven Stories Press, 2002), 345.
“known instigator” . . . “authority”: Police Report Description of Fred Hampton, Chicago Police Department, Red Squad Collection, box 301, Chicago History Museum.

“the Negro youth and moderate”: FBI Director to SACs, May 23, 1968, quoted in Jay Feldman, *Manufacturing Hysteria: A History of Scapegoating, Surveillance, and Secrecy in Modern America* (Pantheon, 2011), 276.
the simmering conflict between the Black Panther Party and law enforcement had erupted: “In 1968 and 1969, there had been more than thirty police raids on Panther offices in eleven states, and over four hundred confrontations between police and party members.” Feldman, *Manufacturing Hysteria*, 282.
In Chicago, on July 16, 1969: “Two Policemen and Gunman Are Wounded During Battle,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1969; Earl Caldwell, “Lawyer Names 19 Panthers He Says Were Slain,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1969.
“It takes two to tango”: Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton*, 62, 66.
“And Fred—he just raised his head up”: Deborah Johnson, interview with Jose “Cha-Cha” Jiménez, c. 1990, Collection on the Young Lords, box 4, file folder 10, DePaul University Special Collections.
“extreme viciousness”: Dave Roos, “The 1969 Raid That Killed Black Panther Leader Fred Hampton,” History.com, January 29, 2021.
the cops, and Hanrahan, were lying: *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, film directed by Stanley Nelson Jr., 2015.
William O’Neal: Feldman, *Manufacturing Hysteria.*
“If you’re asked”: *The Murder of Fred Hampton*, film directed by Howard Alk and Mike Gray, 1971.
“causing damage to the cars”: “Police Squad Car Bombed: Blast Breaks 30 Windows of Buildings,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 6, 1969.
“Information has been received”: FBI AirTel from FBI Director, “Students for a Democratic Society (SDS),” October 23, 1969.
My Lai: Gilbert Rozman, *U.S. Leadership, History, and Bilateral Relations in Northeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 56.
They decorated the place: “Weatherman Conducts a ‘War Council’,” *Guardian*, January 10, 1970.
“Time started to drag”: Grathwohl, *Bringing Down America*, 103.
“her words belied her feminine appearance”: Grathwohl, *Bringing Down America*, 103.
“We fucked up” . . . “Wild!”: “Weatherman Conducts a ‘War Council.’”
the Manson cult’s end-times barbarism: In fact, “barbarism” was a popular new slogan in the group at the time. See *San Francisco Good Times*, Liberation News Service, January 8, 1970.
“There was a touch of kamikaze-ism”: Lear, “Rebel Without a Pause.”
“overthrow the racist America power structure”: “The Weather Underground: Senate Report,” 23.
“We can’t just stand around”: Grathwohl, *Bringing Down America*, 103.
“It’s a wonderful feeling to hit a pig”: Rudd, *Underground*, 189.
sex- and drug-fueled free-for-all: “It was a feeling that things were escalating to a point of almost like hysteria,” says Terry’s girlfriend, Lisa Meisel. “That sex and violence and language and dancing — all that stuff was unhinged.”
“I was feeling very bourgeois”: Dana Snitzky, “The Month That Killed the Sixties,” *Longreads*, September 22, 2016.
revolutionary heroines: “Women’s liberation [they said] comes not only with taking leadership roles and with asserting yourself politically, but also with overcoming hangups about violence.” *San Francisco Good Times*.
“[Members of the Weather Bureau]”: FBI memo from C. D. Brennan to Mr. W. C. Sullivan, “Students for a Democratic Society,” January 26, 1970.
Nine-year-old John Murtagh Jr.: John M. Murtagh, “Fire in the Night,” *City Journal*, April 30, 2008.

“I remember standing in the kitchen”: “Child Victim of William Ayers Nail Bomb Speaks Out,” by Fox and Friends, posted October 9, 2008, by AcissejAcissej123, YouTube.
They were planning a spring offensive: In February, California Weathermen allegedly bombed another police parking lot, injuring an officer in Berkeley, but the group did not take credit for the action. See Brian Burrough, “Meet The Weather Underground’s Bomb Guru,” *Vanity Fair,* March 29, 2015.
“I don’t want you to get left behind”: Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 100.
13th Precinct police station: Though he’s not a reliable source, Larry Grathwohl claims that Bill himself chose the Police Officers Association as the target, in retaliation for three Black men killed in Detroit in July 1967 at the Algiers Motel. See Grathwohl, *Bringing Down America*, 139; Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 31.
“a Weatherman group led by Bill Ayers”: Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 31.
James Wilkerson: Wilkerson was an ad executive who ran a chain of Midwestern radio stations. See John Neary, “The Two Girls from No. 18,” *Life*, March 27, 1970.
“I told him I had the flu”: Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 332.
a neighbor watched: Sale, *SDS*, 3.
“I thought they were redecorators”: Douglas Robinson, “Parents of Miss Wilkerson Bid Her Clarify Bomb Toll,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1970.
“Being middle-class kids”: Cathy Wilkerson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee for *Mother Country Radicals* podcast, November 10, 2020.
Fort Dix, near Trenton, New Jersey: Members of Weatherman’s New York cell had protested for months in support of the Fort Dix 38, the soldiers court-martialed following the riot, and, in meetings with other antiwar groups, had even proposed a violent assault on the base—storming the stockade in a symbolic prison break—which the other groups rejected as unrealistic, dangerous, and borderline insane. See Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 42.
“the tension in the air”: Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 341.
“I was thinking that even”: Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 343.
“He was totally freaked”: Wilkerson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee.
“We were all terrified”: Wilkerson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee.
“noticeably somber”: Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 342.
thin almost to the point of anorexia: Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 95.
“pressure”: Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 95.
“The thing you don’t understand”: Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 95.
Terry threaded a doorbell wire: Sale, *SDS*, 3.
staggered together out of the dark smoking rubble: There are provocative claims that three other people staggered out of the townhouse along with Cathy and Kathy, and were never identified. Sale, *SDS*, 4.
Susan Blanchard Wager, Ann Hoffman: “The Weather Underground: Senate Report,” 51.
The two young Weatherwomen quickly showered: Wilkerson, *Flying Close to the Sun*, 347; Wilkerson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee.

Part 4: **Underground(s)**

The building had been rebuilt: By architect Hugh Hardy, who eventually sold it to metals magnet David Langworthy and his wife, Norma, an off-Broadway theater producer. The Langworthys in turn sold it to Justin Korsant, a financier, for more than $9 million. See Ralph Blumenthal, "Reconstruction Planned for Infamous Townhouse in Greenwich Village," *New York Times*, June 8, 2014.
"the headless body": Neary, "The Two Girls from No. 18."
"In a strained voice": Robinson, "Parents of Miss Wilkerson."
recovered the body: Powers, *Diana*, 5.
"You're out": Ayers, *Fugitive Days*, 207.
"J.J. had no advocates": Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 103.
"It doesn't matter": Rudd, *Underground*, 214.
Jane Collective: Founded by a UChicago Student, Heather Booth, in 1965. See Ron Grossman, "Flashback: Before *Roe v. Wade*, The Jane Collective Served Chicago Women," *Chicago Tribune*, January 20, 2017.
abortion activists smuggling pills: Stephania Taladrid, "The Post-Roe Abortion Underground," *New Yorker*, October 10, 2022.
"I envy you": attributed to Ernesto "Che" Guevara, to American activists, 1964.
"Declaration of a State of War": The Declaration was issued on May 21, 1970, and published in the *Berkeley Tribe*, July 31, 1970, where the spelling was "Amerikan."
H. Rap Brown: Head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and briefly the Black Panther Party's minister of justice.
"the magnitude of the internal security problem": Tom Charles Huston, "Talking Paper prepared for President Nixon," June 5, 1970.
"There's a bomb in police headquarters": Edward Kirkman, "Angry Together: Bombing Stirs All Cops," *New York Daily News*, June 11, 1970. This was actually fifteen days after the Declaration, which promised an attack within fourteen days, but a bomb planted on June 6 in the San Francisco Hall of Justice failed to go off.
No one was killed or seriously injured: Though several police officers outside reported minor cuts from flying glass or damage to their eardrums from the sound of the blast.
Communiqué #2: Communiqué #1 was the Declaration of War itself. In Bernardine Dohrn, Bill Ayres, and Jeff Jacobs, eds., *Sing a Battle Song: The Revolutionary Poetry, Statements, and Communiques of the Weather Underground 1970–1974* (Seven Stories Press, 2006).
"Society of the Spectacle": See T. K. Wilson, *Killing Strangers: How Political Violence Became Modern* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
"I want to go out on a limb": Memo from Tom Charles Huston, March 11, 1970.
"Our people": Quoted in "Hearings before the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities of the United States Senate," 94th Cong, 1st sess., vol. 2, Huston Plan, September 23, 24, and 25, 1975, p. 86.
"Terroristic violence surrounds us": See Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 137.
Ten Most Wanted list: Replacing Angela Davis, who had been captured the previous day. See "Angela Davis, U.S. Communist Militant, Is Denied Bond," *Granma*, October 15, 1970.
Airports . . . federal buildings: "The Weather Underground: Senate Report," 35.
"Bullshit!": Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 97.
"were not the conscience": Hayden, "Justice in the Streets."
"wearing white jeans": FBI enciphered teletype from Dallas to El Paso, Houston, and San Antonio, April 15, 1970.
motel in Shreveport: "Bernardine Dohrn Seen in Louisiana," Associated Press, October 16, 1980.

Del Rio, Texas: FBI AirTel from FBI Director to SAC Albany, January 19, 1971, obtained via FOIA request.
El Granada: FBI report, "Bernardine Dohrn AKA Fugitive IO# 4364 Top Ten Fugitive," April 15, 1971.
Crocket Hotel in San Antonio: FBI memo from SA Donald C. Jochem to SAC San Antonio (88-6227), August 16, 1971.
Princess Beauty Supply Co.: FBI memo from Complaint Clerk David A. Wall to SAC San Antonio (88-6227), September 8, 1970, obtained via FOIA request.
Beirut airport: FBI report 176-1637, December 4, 1970, obtained via FOIA request.
Matamoros, Mexico: FBI memo from SA Charles W. Denny to SAC San Antonio, October 16, 1970.
distracted by what they called a "double": Ronald Koziol, "Dohrn 'Double' Gives FBI Fits," *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1970.
well-bred, pretty white girl: Newspaper headlines often referred to Bernardine as a girl: for example, "Weatherman Girl Put on FBI List," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 15, 1970; "Girl Fugitive Threatened Offensive," *Boston Globe*, October 9, 1970.
"We can't talk about it": Pat Leisner, "Their parents still love Bernardine, Jennifer," Associated Press, October 25, 1970.
"declined to furnish any such information": FBI report 176-1637, December 4, 1970, obtained via FOIA request.
could barely get out of bed: FBI report 176-1637, December 4, 1970.
"as if [Bernardine] never existed": FBI report, "Bernardine Dohrn AKA Fugitive IO# 4364 Top Ten Fugitive," October 15, 1971, obtained via FOIA request.
"was unable to state": FBI report, "Bernardine Rae Dohrn AKA Fugitive IO# 4364 Top Ten Fugitive," June 16, 1971, obtained via FOIA request.
"We just want to be left alone": Krizmis, "Bernardine Dohrn."
middle-aged working-class white guys: See Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 104.
phone records . . . friends: FBI report, "Bernardine Dohrn AKA Fugitive IO# 4364 Top Ten Fugitive," July 24, 1970.
lawyer's office: FBI report, "Bernardine Dohrn AKA Fugitive IO# 4364 Top Ten Fugitive," April 15, 1971.
life insurance agent: FBI report, "Bernardine Dohrn AKA Fugitive IO# 4364 Top Ten Fugitive," July 24, 1970.
gynecologist: FBI report 176-1637, April 15, 1971, obtained via FOIA request.
"pap smear indicated": FBI report, "Bernardine Rae Dohrn AKA Fugitive IO# 4364 Top Ten Fugitive," June 16, 1971, obtained via FOIA request.
"Family, friends and former associates": FBI report, file 88-50200, "Bernardine Rae Dohrn," July 24, 1970.
"Once they went underground": Georgie Anne Geyer and Keyes Beech, "How FBI Spies Infiltrate the Left," part 7 of "Cuba: School for U.S. Radicals," *Chicago Daily News*, October 19, 1970.
"Che taught us": Bernardine Dohrn, Communiqué #1, May 21, 1970. *Berkeley Tribe*, July 31, 1970.
broadly sympathetic with those goals: Sale calls this phenomenon "the Weathermyth": "The fact that they . . . continued to run free, living underground, confounding the most massive police force in the world, gave them a certain stature . . . and even if very few wanted to join up, many responded to their reverberations." Sale, *SDS*, 653.
"orange sunshine": Benjamin Ramm, "The LSD Cult That Transformed America," BBC.com, January 12, 2017.
War on Drugs: John Ehrlichman, Nixon's domestic policy adviser: "The Nixon White House . . . had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks

with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news." Dan Baum, "Legalize It All: How to Win the War on Drugs," *Harper's Magazine*, April 2016.

radical lawyer: Michael Kennedy, a prominent defense attorney with a long list of famous clients, including the IRA and Ivanka Trump; he also represented César Chavez, Black Panther founder Huey P. Newton, LSD guru Timothy Leary, and my mom.

Leary shimmied up a lone telephone pole: "Timothy Leary, Drug Advocate, Walks Away from Coast Prison," *New York Times*, September 14, 1970.

Buddha statue: Leary was known to be fascinated by Buddhism; his 1964 book *Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was an attempt to integrate Buddhist teachings into his theories on the use of hallucinogenic drugs.

1964 Dodge pickup: Kathrine Beck, "Van Lydegraf, Clayton (1915–1992)," HistoryLink.org, December 10, 2020.

gas station restroom two miles south on Highway 101: "Timothy Leary, Drug Advocate, Walks Away from Coast Prison."

Communiqué #4: The third was on July 26, 1970, claiming credit for the bombs at the Presidio army base and the Bank of America building. *San Francisco Good Times*, September 1970.

villa in the suburb of El Biar: Burrough, *Days of Rage*, 185.

"white, radical Mother Country": Though in private Cleaver was apparently telling his allies that he imagined using these "white Mother Country radicals" primarily as cannon fodder: "see I'm drafting Whitey to take the first heat," he said. "Weathermen and all that." Elaine Brown, "'A Taste of Power': The Woman Who Led the Black Panther Party," *Longreads*, January 1, 1992.

"Total liberty": Eldridge Cleaver, quoted in John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 459.

expelled nine members of the Panther 21: Edith Evans Asbury, "Newton Denounces 2 Missing Panthers," *New York Times*, February 10, 1971.

"Purpose of counterintelligence action": "Response of the Government to the Black Panther Party," *The Huey Newton Reader*, edited by David Hilliard and Donald Weise (Seven Stories Press, 2002), 355; FBI Airtel from FBI Director, September 16, 1970, quoted in Churchill and Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers*, 150.

put out a hit on the Panther 21: Paul Wolf, *COINTELPRO: The Untold American Story*, 60. The book was compiled by the Congressional Black Caucus and a copy was presented to U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, on September 1, 2001.

paramilitary leadership of the East Coast Panthers: M. A. Farber, "Behind the Brink's Case: Return of the Radical Left," *New York Times*, February 16, 1982. "I was in charge of the military," Sekou Odinga told me. "I was in charge of the group underground. I was calling a lot of the shots, making decisions on what we'll do from day to day, from week to week, month to month."

Langston Hughes . . . Bessie Smith: Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Lawrence Hill, 2001), 223–24.

tie up the drug dealers: See Jamal Joseph, *Panther Baby: A Life of Rebellion and Reinvention* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2012), 202.

"saw the evil [of slavery]": Frederick Douglass, *An Address* (Dover, NH: Morning Star Printing House, 1881).

Kathy Boudin and Bernardine Dohrn: Burrough, *Days of Rage*, 163.

the ledge . . . collapsed: Jeff Jones, quoted in the film *Underground*.

"The building will blow up": John W. Finney, "Bomb in Capitol Causes Wide Damage," *New York Times*, March 2, 1971.

Half an hour later, two syncopated detonations: The blast also damaged a painted window that showed George Washington with the Marquis de Lafayette and Baron von Steuben during the Revolutionary War. See Marjorie Hunter, "Capitol Rich in History Where Bomb Exploded," *New York Times*, March 2, 1971. According to the Senate architect, the explosion did an estimated $300,000 in damage to the Capitol building, the equivalent of more than $2 million today. See Finney, "Bomb in Capitol Causes Wide Damage," and "War Protesters Set off Bomb in U.S. Capitol Building," History.com, November 16, 2009.
"a shocking act of violence . . . derangement of our society": Finney, "Bomb in Capitol Causes Wide Damage."
doubling the size of the Capitol force: Burrough, *Days of Rage*, 164.
But this, too, is a deflection: Technically, a *tu quoque* fallacy, which tries to defend against valid criticism by pointing to someone else's bad behavior.
twin attacks: Robert Kistler, "Bombs Shatter Two Prison Offices; Cite Jackson Death," *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 1971.
"George Jackson, Black Warrior": Weather Underground Communiqué No. 10, September 1971. In Dohrn, Ayers, and Jacobs, *Sing a Battle Song*, 128.
"We feel the Weather Underground": Sale, *SDS*, 654.
to achieve a unanimous acquittal: Catherine Breslin, "One Year Later: The Radicalization of the Panther 13 Jury," *New York*, May 29, 1972. Ed Kennebeck later became an activist himself, and close friends with Afeni Shakur.
the two cops parked outside Hogan's house: Officers Thomas Curry and Nicholas Binetti. See Joseph P. Fried, "2 Policemen Slain By Shots In Back; 2 Men Are Sought," *New York Times*, May 22, 1971; Robert Daley, "Target Blue," *New York*, March 27, 1973.
Two nights later, on May 21: Fried, "2 Policemen Slain"; Daley, "Target Blue."
"ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE": Black Liberation Army, Communiqué #1, May 1971, Freedom Archives online.
"Cleaver Faction": FBI report, "Black Liberation Army," March 28, 1973.
"We tried praying": *United States v. Shakur, et al.*, 560 F. Supp. 347, SSS 83 Cr. 312 (KTD) (S.D.N.Y. 1983), testimony of Sekou Odinga.
"pull any punches": Wolf, *COINTELPRO*, 61. See also Burrough, *Days of Rage*, 196–97.
targeting of the BLA shifted into high gear: See Burrough, *Days of Rage*, 203, and Wolf, *COINTELPRO*, 61.
On May 19, 1972: May 19 was the one-year anniversary of the BLA's first attack on the NYPD, which had itself been planned to fall on an important revolutionary anniversary.
"a big fog bank": Juan M. Vasquez, "Security Tight in Capital After Blast in Pentagon," *New York Times*, May 20, 1972.
"a return to the mindless display": "The Pentagon Bombing," *New York Times*, May 20, 1972.
constitutional guardrails: See Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 172.
"I am greatly concerned": FBI Airtel from FBI Director to SAC Albany, "Ten Most Wanted Fugitives Program," January 21, 1972.
"What the Weathermen were doing": Bill Dyson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee for *Mother Country Radicals* podcast, October 21, 2020.
broke into my aunt Jennifer's apartment: Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 161.
"We'd give 'em ten to fifteen minutes": Burrough, *Days of Rage*, 135.
sister of a federal fugitive: See FBI memo for the attorney general, "A Summary of the Background and Activities of Jennifer Ellen Dohrn," June 12, 1972.
Hoover had approved the break-in himself: Instead of applying to a federal judge for a warrant, he went directly to Nixon's attorney general, John Mitchell. See Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 162.
"Urban guerrilla warfare": "Testimony of J. Edgar Hoover Before the House Subcommittee on Appropriations," 92nd Cong., 1st sess., March 2, 1972.

L. Patrick Gray, doubled down: Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 195.
"to hunt Weatherman": FBI "Hunt Them to Exhaustion" memo, July 18, 1972, quoted in Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 198.
"Black revolutionaries": Assata Shakur, "To My People," audio recording, transcript printed in "Break de Chains" (pamphlet), National Committee for the Defense of Jo Anne [sic] Chesimard and Clark Squire, 1973. Freedom Archives.
cornered and shot to death: Robert E. Tomasson, "Man Killed and 2 Policemen are Wounded in Harlem Gunfight," *New York Times*, April 20, 1971; "A Suspect in Panther's Death Here is Slain by FBI in South," *New York Times*, January 1, 1972; Larry Celona, "A Break in 1972 Killing of Cops – Former Black Militant Aids Double-Slay Probe," *New York Post*, July 23, 2001; Robert D. McFadden, "Warrant Issued in Police Slaying," *New York Times*, February 19, 1972.
locked up or dead: See Michael T. Kaufman, "Slaying of One of the Last Black Liberation Army Leaders Still at Large Ended a 7-Month Manhunt," *New York Times*, November 16, 1973.
"the bandit queen" . . . "shooting": "hands off," AssataShakur.org, accessed August 14, 2025.
"They call us thieves": Shakur, "To My People," in "Break de Chains."
chesrob: FBI Airtel from Acting Director to San Francisco, "CHESROB," February 27, 1973. Heavily redacted, but indicates the Bureau is looking into "white sympathizers of the ELDREDGE [sic] CLEAVER Faction of the BPP."
On May 2, 1973: Details of the event come from FBI Airtel from SAC Newark to Acting Director, "Fugitive Zayd Malik Shakur; Unsub," May 3, 1973; "An Open Letter from Assata Shakur," from Havana, Cuba, October 5, 2013, published online on Workers World; Joseph F. Sullivan, "Panther, Trooper Slain In Shoot-out," *New York Times*, May 3, 1973; Evelyn A. Williams, "Statement of Facts in the New Jersey trial of Assata Shakur," *The Talking Drum Collective*, June 25, 2005; and Shakur, *Assata*, 3–6.
shaken by his death: Though in public, the BLA remained defiant: "Comrade DEDANE OLUGBALA a/k/a ZAYD MALIK SHAKUR like many other revolutionaries has paid the supreme sacrifice for the liberation of his people," they wrote. "The blood was no super nigger, or super star. He was just a nigger that was tired of the racist pig cops, shooting down unarmed Brothers and Sisters in the street . . . He is a martyr in our eyes and will never be forgotten. We will bury our dead, clean our guns, and prepare for the next battle." Black Liberation Army, Communiqué #12: "Eulogy: Dedane Olugbala AKA Zayd Malk [sic] Shakur," Freedom Archives.

Part 5: **Children in My Mind**

"People have been experimenting": Weather Underground "New Morning" communiqué, December 6, 1970. In Dohrn, Ayres, and Jacobs, eds., *Sing a Battle Song*.
authorities searched for a permanent facility: "Notes on People," *New York Times*, April 8, 1978.
"i'm not letting": Shakur, *Assata*, 93.
"I'm a revolutionary": Shakur, *Assata*, 93.
"The subject of sex came up": "Assata Shakur: Eyes Of The Rainbow," film directed by Gloria Rolando, 1997, posted May 29, 2019, by thepostarchive, YouTube; Shakur, *Assata*, 93.
"If she had any visitors": Les Matthews, "How Did She Get Pregnant In Jail?," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 2, 1974.
"Well, they better not try": Shakur, *Assata*, 123.
"There is nothing to investigate": Matthews, "How Did She Get Pregnant In Jail?"
"Already, i was deeply in love": Shakur, *Assata*, 123–25.
"I was with my daughter": Assata Shakur interview, quoted in Christian Parenti, "Postmodern Maroon in the Ultimate Palenque," in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, edited by Aviva Chomsky et al. (Duke University Press, 2019, 388–93.
"Bernardine Rae Dohrn": FBI memo from FBI Director to SAC San Antonio, "Fugitive Publicity – Cancellation," December 6, 1973.
"to disclose whether it had used": "The Weather Underground: Senate Report," 47.
Julius J. Hoffman: The same judge who presided over the infamous Chicago 7 conspiracy trial, which became one of the inciting incidents of the Days of Rage.
dismissed a series of indictments: "The Weather Underground: Senate Report," 47.
federal charges simply went away: "The Weather Underground: Senate Report," 65.
The FBI hadn't fully given up: See FBI Airtel from SAC Chicago to FBI Director, January 28, 1974.
"never give up" . . . "climate of the times": "Father Hopes for Return of his Radical Daughter," Associated Press, March 23, 1974.
Delia's parents: They helped found the Second City's Playroom School, which helped popularize Viola Spolin's Theater Games and the idea of play therapy.
Mona had attended the Flint War Council: FBI report, "Foreign Influence – Weather Underground Organization, Volume II."
artist friends in LA: Such as Severn Darden, a founding member of Second City, who later played human leader Kolp in the *Planet of the Apes* films.
"It was so much fun": Bernardine Dohrn, email to the author, June 10, 2021.
"war and aggression in Vietnam": John T. McQuiston, "State Department Bombed in Protest," *New York Times*, January 29, 1975.
bomb went off, copycat calls: David Binder, "6,000 in D.C. Flee in Bomb Threats," *New York Times*, January 30, 1975; "9 Federal Offices in Washington Get Bombing Threats," United Press International, January 31, 1975.
"We used to chant," "If you understand": *Underground* (film).
Banco de Ponce: The story was covered as a minor local news item, buried on p. 37 of the *Times*. See Selwyn Raab, "Midtown Puerto Rican Bank Bombed; 'Weather' Group Takes Responsibility," *New York Times*, June 17, 1975.
Kennecott Copper Corporation: Also nowhere near the front page: "None Hurt as Blast In Utah Damages Kennecott Offices," *New York Times*, September 6, 1975, 15.
Home pregnancy tests: The first versions of home tests appeared in U.S. drugstores in 1977, but they were cumbersome miniature chemistry labs and were not widely adopted by consumers until

1988, when Unilever released the first "one-step" test, the Clearblue Easy. See Pagan Kennedy, "Who Made That Home Pregnancy Test?," *New York Times*, July 27, 2012.

"The old world is dying": Gramsci wrote, "*La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi piú svariati*. [The crisis is that the old dies and the new cannot be born; in this in-between-period many morbid phenomena may appear.]" Selections from *The Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers, 1971), 275–76. I have used the more well-known, and more poetic, translation, by Slavoj Žižek, "Living in the Time of Monsters," in *Counterpoints 422* (2012).

plea deals were finally within reach: See FBI Airtel from SAC Chicago to FBI Director, "Weather Underground Organization (WUO)," April 28, 1977.

Van Lydegraf was born in 1915: Beck, "Van Lydegraf, Clayton."

"ultraleft": Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*, 111.

working-class "authenticity": Rudd, *Underground*, 226.

"On the backs of women," my mom's "confession": "THE SPLIT of the Weather Underground Organization: Struggling Against White and Male Supremacy" (John Brown Book Club, 1977). Author's archive.

"The statements": "Fugitive Radicals May Wave White Flag," Associated Press, January 16, 1977.

"I mean, the Weatherman": Bill Dyson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee for *Mother Country Radicals* podcast, October 21, 2020.

November 19, 1977: Along with Van Lydegraf, Judith "Josie" Bissell (33) and Leslie Ann "Esther" Mullin (33); Michael Justesen (27) and Marc Perry (29) were arrested and charged with similar crimes. Van Lydegraf died of cancer in 1992 and is buried in the military veterans' cemetery in San Francisco's Presidio—right next to the Presidio army base blown up by the Weather Underground in 1971. "Nation: Infiltrating the Underground," *Time*, January 9, 1978; "FBI Agents: Living Behind a Radical Mask," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1977; and Beck, "Van Lydegraf, Clayton."

"I had to write a closing report": Bill Dyson, interview with Ariana Gharib Lee, October 21, 2020.

"intelligence excesses" . . . "not been applied": "Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities," 289.

was criminally indicted: See "Law and National Security Intelligence Report," and *Gray v. Bell*, 542 F. Supp. 927 (D.D.C. 1982).

blueprint for Nixon's "plumbers": Eckstein, *Bad Moon Rising*, 257.

"extra-legal" . . . "explosion went off": "Ex-FBI Official OK'd Break-Ins; I'd Do It Again," Associated Press, August 30, 1976.

"they did unlawfully": Anthony Marro, "Gray and 2 Ex-F.B.I. Aides Deny Guilt as 700 at Court Applaud Them," *New York Times*, April 21, 1978; *L. Patrick Gray III v. Griffin Bell, et al.*, 712 F.2d 490 (D.C. Cir. 1983).

block any accountability: See Hon. John Milan Ashbrook, "Don't Make Bernardine Dohrn Any Hero; She Isn't," in *Congressional Record*: *House of Representatives*, December 10, 1980.

"I am writing you": Bernardine Dohrn, letter to Harriet, March 24, 1978.

books and films she's thinking about: She praises Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Girlfriends* by Claudia Weill, and Alice Walker's *Meridian*. She criticizes the Bergman film *Autumn Sonata*, which, she says, "is standard heavy Bergman on mother/daughter snarls." *The Word Is Out*, a book about gay liberation, she finds "not very radical, but extremely moving and beautiful"; Nancy Friday's *My Mother, My Self* is "just too pop-Freudian and glib." And Joan Didion's *The Book of Common Prayer* is "terrible and depressing. Both."

Part 6: **One Last Job**

Leonard Boudin: His clients included Paul Robeson and other alleged Communists called before the House Un-American Activities Committee; Daniel Ellsberg, the whistleblower of the Pentagon Papers; accused Soviet spy Alger Hiss; and gangster/labor leader Jimmy Hoffa; as well as Fidel Castro and his new Cuban government. See "Lawyers Serving Foreign Regimes Must Register," *New York Times*, March 31, 1964.
"The revolution is an unbelievable thing": Kathy Boudin, diary entry, December 1960.
M19CO: Named after a key date in radical history, and a significant anniversary—the birthdate of both Ho Chi Minh (May 19, 1890) and Malcolm X (May 19, 1925), and also the birthdate of Weatherwoman and founding M19CO member Kathy Boudin (May 19, 1943). See Samuel T. Francis, *The Terrorist Underground in the United States* (Nathan Hale Institute, 1985), 4; *Principles of Unity of the May 19th Communist Organization* (1978), 3, 9–10, author's archive.
European–American Bank: "$500,000 Armored Truck Robbery," *New York Times*, April 23, 1980. See also John Castellucci, *Big Dance: The Untold Story of Kathy Boudin and the Terrorist Family That Committed the Brink's Robbery Murder* (Dodd Mead, 1986), 155.
Clinton Correctional Facility: Robert Hanley, "Miss Chesimard Flees Jersey Prison, Helped By 3 Armed 'Visitors'," *New York Times*, November 3, 1979.
even tried hypnosis: Arnold H. Lubasch, "Brink's Testimony Examining Escape," *New York Times*, May 15, 1983.
"We started walking in": Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 139–41.
Hunterdon State School for the Retarded: Now renamed the Hunterdon Developmental Center.
Marilyn Buck: Buck was the one white member of the BLA, sometimes called their quartermaster general. Sekou Odinga had met her at Eldridge Cleaver's Headquarters for World Revolution in Algeria, and the two soon teamed up. See Farber, "Behind the Brink's Case"; and Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 83.
"It was quite fast": Bernardine Dohrn, letter to Harriet, March 14, 1980.
"sharing a joint": Nathaniel Shepherd Jr., "Chicago Home of a Friend Was Refuge for Miss Dohrn," *New York Times*, December 5, 1980.
"I regret not at all": Lear, "Rebel Without a Pause"; James Litke, "Fugitive Leader Surrenders with No Regrets," Associated Press, December 4, 1980.
"make America great again": "Ronald Reagan for President 'Let's Make America Great Again' 1980," posted July 9, 2021, by Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, YouTube.
"a proud mom": Farber, "Behind the Brink's Case."
she took classes to become a paralegal: Kathy collected a welfare check every two weeks for $177.75 under the name Elizabeth Hartwell, while she worked part-time at the Children's Free School on West 113th Street.
"trying to begin again": Kolbert, "The Prisoner," 56.
"Lou found" . . . "Vietnam War": Farber, "Behind the Brink's Case."
Dr. Mutulu Shakur: "In 1977, Shakur was given a month of clinical training and a year-long examination and awarded a doctor of acupuncture degree by the acupuncture Association of Quebec." Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 59.
BAAANA: BAAANA had emerged from the Lincoln Detox acupuncture clinic in the South Bronx, which was founded by the Young Lords and the Black Panthers to treat addicts with acupuncture and political education rather than methadone. This is also where my aunt Jennifer met her husband, Mickey Melendez. See Burrough, *Days of Rage*, 450, 493.
Action 5: Mutulu Shakur (a.k.a. Jeral Williams), Sekou Odinga (a.k.a. Nathaniel Burns), Kuwasi Bulagoon (a.k.a. Donald Weems), Mtayari Shabaka Sundiata (a.k.a. Samuel Smith), and Tyrone Rison.

House O'Weenies: Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 67.
Citibank and Chase Manhattan: "These robberies included: (1) an attempted robbery of an armored truck in Scarsdale, N.Y., on February 20, 1980; (2) an armed robbery of $52,000 from an armored car in the Bronx on February 25, 1980 and the murder of a guard during the robbery; (3) the armed robbery of $529,000 from an armored truck in Inwood, Long Island, on April 22, 1980; (4) an attempted robbery of an armored truck in Danbury, Connecticut, and the wounding of its driver on March 23, 1981; and (5) the armed robbery of $292,000 from a Brink's truck in the Bronx, the killing of one guard, and the wounding of another on June 2, 1981." Francis, *The Terrorist Underground in the United States*, 8.
By late 1981, the alliance: In each of these actions, according to a later CIA report, "the actual robbery . . . was perpetrated by black males using shotguns, automatic rifles, and 9 mm. handguns [using] escape vehicles rented by a white using the identification of a legitimate citizen." Francis, *The Terrorist Underground in the United States*, 8.
to use the stolen money "for black people": According to BLA soldier Sekou Odinga, as quoted in Francis, *The Terrorist Underground in the United States*, 10.
"service relationship mentality": Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 180.
babysitter: Ana Vasquez, a Dominican woman who had her own children and ran an informal home daycare in the neighborhood.
nearly severed his arm from his body: Robert Hanley, "Witness Calls Brink's Killings Justified," *New York Times*, September 13, 1983.
"took out their guns": Arnold H. Lubasch, "Witness Says He Aided 2 Brink's Robbery Suspects," *New York Times*, June 19, 1983.
pancreas ruptured: Burrough, *Days of Rage*, 512.
"They had me cuffed": *United States v. Shakur, et al*.
"bomb-making manuals": Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 220.
Larry Wack: A member of New York City's Bombing Investigation Squad and the FBI's original Joint Terrorism Task Force.
Marjorie A. Rossiter: Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 167.
"Phony Drivers' Licenses": "Phony Drivers' Licenses Traced to Defunct Child's Wear Shop," Associated Press, February 16, 1982.

Part 7: **Children of the Revolution**

twelve-story supermax federal prison: MCC was the first high-rise to be operated by the Bureau of Prisons. Mary Bosworth, *The U.S. Federal Prison System* (Sage, 2002), 272.
"critical disrepair": U.S. Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General, "Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) New York Critical Disrepair," March 15, 2022.
"New Afrikan Freedom Fighters": Black Liberation Army communiqué, July 16, 1983, Freedom Archives.
"I am accused of no crime": See Committee on Character and Fitness Appellate Division: First Department, *In the Matter of Bernardine Dohrn: Applicant for Admission to the Bar After Examination* (1985), 38–39; "Former Underground Radical Refuses to Talk to Brink's Grand Jury," Associated Press, May 17, 1982.
link my mom to the larger conspiracy: *Matter of Dohrn*, 560 F. Supp. 179. (S.D.N.Y. 1983)."
"Ms. Dohrn" . . . "not comply": *In the Matter of Bernardine Dohrn*, 37–38. She also asserted her First, Fourth and Ninth Amendment rights.
"We live in a cage": Kathy Boudin, letter to Bj Richards, October 1982.
"If you touch him": *Boudin v. Thomas*, 543 F. Supp. 686 (S.D.N.Y. 1982).
absence seizures: At the time, these were called petit mal or "little bad" seizures, to distinguish them from the grand mal ("big bad") seizures of severe epilepsy.
"I've got to get out of here!": Farber, "Behind the Brink's Case."
three fractured vertebrae in his neck: Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 243.
"appeared calm" . . . "personality disorder": Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 243.
"yelling, banging fists": *United States v. Shakur, et al.*
desperate and cringing: According to David Gilbert, who could hear from his cell down the hall, "Brown's dealings with Authority . . . were marked by an unbalanced obsequiousness." *United States v. Shakur, et al.*
"provide the federal authorities": *United States v. Shakur, et al.* Only after he agreed to cooperate was Samuel given medical care, ten weeks after his neck was broken: "On January 11, 1983 Brown was admitted to the Westchester County Medical Center . . . Gardiner–Wells tongs were applied to help correct his neck injuries. Surgery was performed on his neck on January 19, 1983 to correct permanently his fracture." *United States v. Shakur, et al.*
"hearing a voice": "The cuts were superficial," they reported, "did not require sutures, a and Brown himself did not perceive it as an attempt to kill himself . . . He has zero suicidal ideations. His ability to think abstractly is good . . . His judgment is fair . . . Thorazine 50 mg IM PRN for evidence of hallucinations or bizarre behavior." *United States v. Shakur, et al.*
"While talking to his oldest son": "Criminal Intelligence Design: The Black Liberation Army – Understanding – Monitoring – Controlling," Maryland State Police, October 1991.
witness protection program: Arnold H. Lubasch, "Suspect in a Brink's Case Aiding U.S.," *New York Times*, November 24, 1982.
snitches, puppets, and traitors: Arnold H. Lubasch, "4 of 6 Are Guilty in U.S. Brink's Case." *New York Times*, September 4, 1983.
They said Tyrone Rison had admitted: Michael Warren and Jill Elijah, Mutulu Shakur's attorneys, letter to "Dear Friends," June 1988.
"Dear friends": Bill Ayers, letter, September 1, 1982.
"One life": The quotation is widely attributed to Joan of Arc, but is likely paraphrased from Maxwell Anderson's 1946 play *Joan of Lorraine*, which is itself adapted from trial transcripts and popular history.
left-wing lawyer friend: Elliot Wilk, who would go on to become a state judge; he kept a picture of Che Guevara on the wall in his chambers for the rest of his career. Douglas Martin, "Elliott Wilk,

Judge and Dry Wit, Dies at 60," *New York Times*, July 3, 2002.
"[She] is intractable": Another judge in one of the Brink's cases picked up the Joan of Arc comparison, adding his own sarcastic aside: "While Saint Jeanne was canonized for what she did, probably most modern philosophers regard her as deranged." Judge Charles L. Brieant in *Matter of Jabbar*, 560 F. Supp. 186 (S.D.N.Y. 1983). There were multiple separate trials, most of them concluding in the fall of 1983.
"Dohrn has now been confined": *In the Matter of Bernardine Dohrn*, 40.
"What will happen": Kathy Boudin, letter to Leonard and Jean Boudin, October 1981.
got married in the Orange County jail: Castellucci, *Big Dance*, 284.
"I remain essentially": Kathy Boudin, "Sentencing Statement," May 3, 1984, author's archive.
"Wait, while I sob": Berger, *Outlaws of America*, 281.
Haywood Burns: Haywood had represented Angela Davis and the prisoners of the Attica uprising, among many other notable clients and causes.
"Grow up to be good revolutionaries": María del Carmen Ariet García and Disamis Arcia Muñoz, eds., *I Embrace You with All My Revolutionary Fervor: Letters, 1947–1967 by Ernesto Che Guevara* (Seven Stories Press, 2001), and "The Responsibilities of the Working Class in Our Revolution (June 18, 1960)," in David Deutschmann, ed., *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution: Writings and Speeches of Ernesto Che Guevara* (Pathfinder, 1987), 103–23.
the word *revolution*: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* online.
"I told them not to touch him!": Kevin Gillies, "The Last Radical," *Vancouver*, November 1998.
"Life is admittedly lonely and sad": Gillies, "The Last Radical."
"He wanted to live like Che": Gillies, "The Last Radical."

***Epilogue:* Memories of a Revolution**

"Great to see you!": Text message, February 1, 2024.
opinion piece on Luigi Mangione: Light Dohrn, "For Millions, Our Broken Health Care System Turns Desperation into Tragedy," *U-High Midway*, January 16, 2025.

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INTERSTATE FLIGHT - MOB ACTION; RIOT; CONSPIRACY

I. O. 4364
4-24-70

WANTED BY FBI

BERNARDINE RAE DOHRN

FBI No. 56,360 H
20 0 9 R 010 12
L 17 R 010

OTHER NAMES KNOWN BY: Marion DelGado, Bernadine Dohrn, Bernardine Rae Ohrnstein, H. T. Smith

Photographs taken 1969

Bernardine Dohrn

DESCRIPTION
AGE: 28, born January 12, 1942, Chicago, Illinois
HEIGHT: 5'5"
WEIGHT: 125 pounds
BUILD: medium
HAIR: dark brown
EYES: brown
COMPLEXION: light olive
RACE: white
NATIONALITY: American
OCCUPATION: secretary
SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER USED: 395-38-5006

CAUTION
DOHRN REPORTEDLY MAY RESIST ARREST, HAS BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH PERSONS WHO ADVOCATE USE OF EXPLOSIVES AND MAY HAVE ACQUIRED FIREARMS. CONSIDER DANGEROUS.

A Federal warrant was issued on March 17, 1970, at Chicago, Illinois, charging Dohrn with unlawful interstate flight to avoid prosecution for mob action (Title 18, U. S. Code, Section 1073). A Federal warrant was issued on April 2, 1970, at Chicago, Illinois, charging Dohrn with violation of Federal Antiriot Laws and conspiracy (Title 18, U. S. Code, Sections 2101 and 371).

IF YOU HAVE INFORMATION CONCERNING THIS PERSON, PLEASE CONTACT YOUR LOCAL FBI OFFICE. TELEPHONE NUMBERS AND ADDRESSES OF ALL FBI OFFICES LISTED ON BACK.

Identification Order 4364
April 24, 1970

J. Edgar Hoover
Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D. C. 20535

At the top, there is a black banner with white text reading WANTED BY F B I. Below, the individual's name is prominently displayed as Bernardine Rae Dohrn. There are two photographs of the person side by side: one showing a profile view and the other a frontal view. To the right of the images is the individual's signature. Beneath the photos, there is a descriptive section containing details such as age, height, and social security number. A caution section warns about the individual's past activities. At the bottom, there is text advising people to contact law enforcement if they have information

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Extended image description for Figure

INTERSTATE FLIGHT - MOB ACTION; RIOT; CONSPIRACY
WANTED BY FBI
The persons shown here are active members of the militant Weatherman faction of the Students for a Democratic Society - SDS.
Federal warrants have been issued at Chicago, Illinois, concerning these individuals, charging them with a variety of Federal violations including interstate flight to avoid prosecution, mob action, Antiriot Laws and conspiracy. Some of these individuals were also charged in an indictment returned 7/23/70, at Detroit, Michigan, with conspiracy to violate Federal Bombing and Gun Control Laws.
These individuals should be considered dangerous because of their known advocacy and use of explosives, reported acquisition of firearms and incendiary devices, and known propensity for violence.
If you have information concerning these persons please contact your local FBI Office.
William Charles Ayers W/M, 25, 5-10, 170 brn hair, brn eyes
Kathie Boudin W/F, 26, 5-4, 120 brn hair, blue eyes
Judith Alice Clark W/F, 20, 5-3, 125 brn hair, brn eyes
Bernardine Rae Dohrn W/F, 28, 5-5, 125 drk brn hair, brn eyes
Naomi Esther Jaffe W/F, 27, 5-2, 105 dk brn hair, brn eyes
Jeffrey Carl Jones W/M, 23, 5-11, 150 blond hair, blue eyes
David Benjamin Kiaffer W/M, 23, 5-8, 150 brn hair, brn eyes
Howard N. Machtinger W/M, 23, 5-10, 150 brn hair, green eyes
Celeste M. McCullough W/F, 23, 5-4/5-5, 120 brn hair, brn eyes
Wendy Jane Packer W/F, 21, 5-3, 125 brn hair, brn eyes
Robert Henry Roth W/M, 20, 5-8, 130 brn hair, brn eyes
Mark William Rudd W/M, 23, 5-11, 170 brn hair, blue eyes
Ronald D. Fliegelman W/M, 26, 5-9, 175 black hair, blue eyes
John Allen Fuerst W/M, 26, 5-10, 160 brn hair, brn eyes
Leonard Handelsman W/M, 24, 5-5, 210 brn hair, blue eyes
John Gregory Jacobs W/M, 23, 5-9, 150 lt brn hair, gray eyes
Michael Louis Spiegel W/M, 24, 6-1, 165 brn hair, brn eyes
Caroline M. Tanner W/F, 21, 5-3, 105 brn hair, blue eyes
Lawrence Michael Weiss W/M, 22, 6-1, 170 brn hair, hazel eyes
Cathlyn P. Wilkerson W/F, 23, 5-6, 110-115 brn hair, brn eyes

F B I wanted poster featuring black and white photographs of individuals arranged in four rows. Each row contains portraits of varying number of people. Above the portraits, there is a header section with text detailing information about the persons shown in the images, who are described as being part of a radical organization. Each portrait has accompanying text beneath it providing the individual’s name, date of birth, and other identifying details.

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Extended image description for Figure

BANK ROBBERY

Entered NCIC

I. D. 4489
2-10-72

WANTED BY FBI

JOANNE DEBORAH CHESIMARD

FBI No. 11,102 J 7

6 1 aAa 11
1 aAa

ALIASES: Joanne Byron, Joanne Chesterman, Joan Davis, Barbara Odoms

Photographs taken 1971

DESCRIPTION

AGE: 24, born July 16, 1947, New York, New York (not supported by birth records)
HEIGHT: 5'6"
WEIGHT: 110 to 120 pounds
BUILD: slender
HAIR: black
EYES: brown
COMPLEXION: medium
RACE: Negro
NATIONALITY: American
SCARS AND MARKS: scar on abdomen from gunshot wound
SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER USED: 051-38-5131

CAUTION

CHESIMARD IS BEING SOUGHT IN CONNECTION WITH A BANK ROBBERY IN WHICH GUNS WERE USED. SHE REPORTEDLY IS CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH PERSONS WHO ARE ALLEGED TO BE HEAVILY ARMED WITH EXPLOSIVES AND A VARIETY OF GUNS, INCLUDING AUTOMATIC RIFLES AND HANDGUNS. CONSIDER ARMED AND DANGEROUS.

A Federal warrant was issued on January 17, 1972, at New York, New York, charging Chesimard with bank robbery (Title 18, U. S. Code, Section 2113a).

IF YOU HAVE INFORMATION CONCERNING THIS PERSON, PLEASE CONTACT YOUR LOCAL FBI OFFICE. TELEPHONE NUMBERS AND ADDRESSES OF ALL FBI OFFICES LISTED ON BACK.

Identification Order 4489
February 10, 1972

J. Edgar Hoover
Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D. C. 20535

F B I wanted poster featuring Joanne Deborah Chesimard. At the top, there is a bold heading indicating her name and status with the FBI. Below this, there are two rows of fingerprint images, each showing different fingerprints belonging to Chesimard. The middle section of the poster contains two black and white photographs of Chesimard: one profile view

and one frontal view. The bottom of the poster includes descriptive details about Chesimard and a signature section, along with a caution notice.

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